I continue to do the best I can in the absence of Derek’s Main Line Prime and in the absence of a truly great butcher. Heavily smoked and heavily rubbed, ribs are ribs, I suspect, and the difference between Duroc or Kurobuta and plain old ribs may largely be the fact that the Kurobuta costs three times as much. Oh, yeah, and the fact that the plain old ribs may actually break down and become more tender during slow smoking. So I go to the plain old supermarket and buy plain old ribs. I prepare them, going through the slow and tedious process of pulling off the “sliver skin”, a thin fibrous membrane on the inside surface of the ribs that interferes with the absorption of the flavor of the rubs and of the smoke. I don’t go through the process of converting them into St. Louis ribs, cutting them into rectangular racks or removing the fleshy flap from the inside of the rack. Kansas City ribs they remain.

Still, we can’t serve plain old supermarket plain old ribs to my Memorial Day guests, and we can no longer find heritage breeds of pork. What to do? Take a heritage bottle of Jack Daniels and carefully give the ribs a loving Jack Daniels massage. Properly done, all the Jack is absorbed and there is virtually nothing wasted at the bottom of the tray. The ribs glisten a healthy and grateful pink in their post-massage contentment and, while I am not exactly envious, I think a Jack Daniels massage is starting to sound pretty good for me, too. The ribs sure look better for it. But I delay my own Jack Daniels massage for another day.

I then apply a thick coating of rub to the ribs. I use two different rubs, an extremely mild basic red rub, which my wife prefers, and a thorough fiery variant of a Memphis rub.
Basic Red Rub (Cribbed from Raichlen, Again)

¼ cup raw (turbinado) sugar
¼ sweet Hungarian paprika (use the real thing; I buy from Penzeys.com)
3 tablespoons freshly ground black pepper (again, use the real thing)
0 tablespoon hickory smoked salt (Raichlen uses 1 tablespoon, I just omit, since the ribs are going to be smoked over hickory for six hours anyway!)
3 teaspoons garlic powder (50% more than he uses, but you can’t have too much garlic, and, once again, use the real thing from Penzeys)
2 teaspoons onion powder
2 teaspoons celery seeds
½ teaspoon medium hot crushed red pepper flakes (Raichlen uses a full teaspoon of ground cayenne, but I find that using a milder flake and reducing the quantity by half actually helps the balance)

Note that I made several modifications to Raichlen’s basic red rub. I have found that taming it down a little makes it easier to taste the meat and especially to taste the hickory smoke, and also makes the dish much more palatable to children, to my wife, and to many of my guests.
Note the racks neatly arrayed for smoking. With the coaching I have received from a range of barbecue friends, from my old MIT advisor Bob Rose and his Texas son in law, through Matt Kreuger, restaurant manager and pit master at Victory, I’ve just about got this right by now. Slow smoked below $180^\circ$ for four hours to create the smoky flavor, then smoked at $200^\circ+$ for another two hours to break down the collagens and soften the meat.

I would say that the ribs came out just about perfect. I did learn another important lesson, which is not to apply hot rubs too thickly. The Memphis rub is fiery hot and in moderation creates a wonderful and savory crust on the meat. Used to excess, as has been my wont for years, it just produces a painfully hot slurry. I happen to like the slurry. But this is not true to the style of the Memphis preparation.

Jean did a wonderful job with a large batch of Cornell chicken. The supermarket did an adequate job with potato salad and macaroni salad, which I will mix for plate lunch later in the weekend. Jean made real coleslaw and a real salad. Mother Nature did a wonderful job with strawberries and watermelon, and Ben & Jerry came through with a fantastic Amazon chocolate ice cream and a brown sugar ice cream. I figured that if berries are served at British High Tea with brown sugar and cream, this was probably a perfect ice cream selection, and it was. We were all somewhat baffled by the concept of watermelon as a year round fruit, but it worked well.

The beers were selected with care, of course. A Lost Abbey Devotion was a welcome beer, served with tame appetizers. A magnificent Allagash Tripel stood up nicely to the hickory smoked mild ribs, and a Victory Wild Devil provided the kick, the spicy, and the malt backbone to wrestle the Memphis Ribs to a draw.
I’m particularly fond of the Wild Devil, and persist in trying to convince the brewery staff that Bill and Ron named it after me. I have repeatedly been told that if it had been named after me it would have been called Old Devil. It’s a marvelous beer, with a unique combination of an amber roast Vienna malt for body, a full Hop Devil slam of Cascade American hops, and reliance upon *Brettanomyces* wild-style Belgian yeast for fermentation. This is about as international as you can get. The beer is bottle conditioned, which means secondary Brett fermentation occurs in the bottle, and by now it is just about perfect. The Brett has given it a sweat sock and horse blanket funk, a touch of sourness, and a range of vinous and fruity complexity, complementing its Vienna malt sweetness and its Pacific Northwest American hoppiness.

And, in an era of eating lighter, Jean’s Cornell chicken largely vanished, but after feeding seven adults we still have two complete racks of ribs, out of the three we started with. That’s what freezers are for.

ekc