

Taking the Pork Out of Politics for Fun and Profit



ANDRÉS ALONSO



While senators argued over pork barrel spending in a late night budget debate, overworked and underfed U.S. Senate staffer Brett Thompson, JD '00, longed for barbecue. That night he and a colleague conceived Pork Barrel BBQ, which in a scant few years has grown into a thriving nationwide business.

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LAW SCHOOL ALUMNUS BRETT THOMPSON developed a taste for politics—and barbecue—early on. While in law school, he worked for then-Congressman Jim Talent on his run for Missouri governor, a race Talent narrowly lost. After graduating in 2000, Thompson joined the St. Louis firm of Lewis, Rice and Fingersh, doing mergers, acquisitions, and IPOs. But he was soon “persuaded” by Talent to re-enter the political arena.

Talent asked Thompson to be his policy director for his 2002 Senate race, but Thompson declined. “I was done with politics,” he recalls, “and had scheduled my wedding for the week before the 2002 election.”

But that wasn’t the end of it. “He came back a couple weeks later,” Thompson says, “after he had approached my managing partner, and said, ‘You’re going to be my policy director in the race for Senate.’ So of course I said, ‘Yes.’”

After the successful election, Thompson went to Washington to set up Talent’s Senate office. Talent then offered him the position of legislative director. Again Thompson demurred: “I said, ‘Boss, I’ve never worked in the Senate. I don’t know how this place works.’ And he said, ‘That’s all right. I’ve never worked in it either. We’ll figure it out together.’”

THAT LED TO the fateful night, some four years later, when Thompson and fellow staffer Heath Hall were longing for some Missouri barbecue. “We were watching senators talk about earmarks and pork barrel spending, and we had had pizza four nights in a row,” he recalls.

“So we started talking about our favorite subject, which was dinner, and wanting to get some good barbecue, with him being from Kansas City and me being from St. Louis. That’s how we came up with the name for Pork Barrel BBQ.”

But things did not begin cooking for Thompson and Pork Barrel BBQ until two years later. By 2008 Talent had lost his re-election bid and Thompson had moved on to the D.C. lobbying and public affairs firm of Mercury LLC. However, Thompson and Hall decided to undertake some kitchen experimentation and, after some weeks, convened the inaugural meeting of the Pork Barrel BBQ Kitchen Cabinet.

The cabinet members—made up of family and friends—were asked to rate six variations of a barbecue rub. Their feedback soon resulted in the fledgling company’s first product: Pork Barrel BBQ’s All American Spice Rub. The question on the floor then was: How to market it?

“We had no money, so we went to social media and just started doing a lot initially with Twitter,” says Thompson.

“Quickly—and I don’t know how; perhaps because we had too much free time—we became the world’s largest barbecue on Twitter.” The company’s 27,000 Twitter followers then “drew the attention of producers for Mark Burnett, who was starting an ABC-TV show called *Shark Tank*.”

With the help of Talent and former Texas Congressman Max Sandlin—now Thompson’s colleagues at Mercury LLC—he and Hall put together an audition video and sent it to *Shark Tank*.

“Six weeks later we were staring down 20 cameras and going in front of the show’s financial sharks,” says Thompson, where he and Hall got grilled. “We used all the skills we had learned in law school about preparing for trial,” convincing *Shark Tank* moderator Barbara Corcoran to invest in Pork Barrel BBQ.

“It really launched our company,” says Thompson. “When we went on the show, we were only in three grocery stores. Now we’re in a thousand stores in 40 states and have a restaurant deal, with a Pork Barrel Restaurant opening in Alexandria, Virginia. We’re on pace to exceed a million dollars in revenues in early 2011.”

BUT THE TREK FROM MAKING LAW to making barbecue sauce was not all that far, according to Thompson. “Washington University gives you the tools to be successful in business or any venture—the critical-thinking process and the planning skills, along with the confidence that you gain from being a Washington University law student and having a great faculty that really pushes you to excel.”

Thompson serves—evenings and weekends—as Pork Barrel BBQ CEO, and Hall, as president. “We’re still doing it all on our own,” says Thompson. “We like to use the phrase—it’s our company motto—‘Reward lives in the house of risk.’”

However, Thompson has yet to risk quitting his day job as managing director at Mercury. “My job is to help companies who want to get things done in Washington, D.C.,” says Thompson, “usually in a very high-stakes setting.

“Every day I use a different skill that I learned or honed at Washington University. My law school training gives me the confidence, in any forum, to be passionate about what I know and believe in. It’s a great opportunity, and I get to meet a lot of great people and learn new things every day.”

Opportunity abounds as well for Pork Barrel BBQ, which was recently named America’s best barbecue sauce by *Men’s Health* magazine. That honor led Thompson’s 4-year-old son, Sawyer, to attempt to sell a bottle of it at a food show for \$87,000.

“I think,” says Thompson, “we have another Washington University law student in the making.” ■■■