

# Why Is Brisket So Expensive? An In-Depth Investigation

Right before the pandemic, the brisket cut was priced at around \$2.82 per pound, on average. This year, you can pay more than \$5 per pound at some stores. Even more, famous chains, like Dickey's, sell some of their brisket dishes at \$17.

So, why is brisket so expensive?

Brisket is originally a cheap meat cut, but all meat prices have been soaring since the pandemic. This is because of profiteering companies, higher costs, and a lower supply of meat. At the same time, the popularity of Texan and Korean cuisines has increased the demand for brisket. Above all, technology has made it easier for everybody to smoke brisket at home.

In this article, we'll highlight the various factors that transformed brisket from a cheap cut to one of the most expensive dishes nowadays.

## 4 Reasons Why Brisket Is Expensive

There are various factors behind the increased prices of brisket. For simplicity, we've broken them down into four major categories.

### 1. More Demand for Brisket

People will always tell you that prices are all about [supply and demand](#). This is still partly true in the case of brisket.

So, let's see why more people are after brisket nowadays.

#### Popularized Brisket

It seems like nobody knew the value of brisket until [Texas popularized its barbecue style](#). When people discovered the craft of tenderizing brisket, there was no going back to old methods.

Cooking shows and social media influencers have marketed this meat cut to the wider population. Additionally, there are barbecue and smoking festivals that popularized outdoor cooking.

Nowadays, we're not tied to our traditional recipes; people eat what's popular on the internet. Most of us are relearning to cook for that purpose.

Added to that, there's the growing community of barbecue enthusiasts that encourages more of its members to master the brisket smoking challenge.

## Brisket Home-Cooking

Frankly, there are shortcuts to making a brisket, so it isn't that much of a challenge anymore. This is because technology has made expert tools available to the public. Nowadays, you can easily purchase a [top-notch smoker](#) and a thermometer for monitoring the temperature.

With the help of YouTube videos and some training, these tools can grill a brisket that's worth showing off. Obviously, there's no better way to demonstrate this talent than inviting your friends over for a barbecue gathering.

Interestingly, the spread of barbecue parties is another culprit behind the high brisket prices. Again, affordable grilling tools have made this luxury accessible to more people.

## Restaurants Spike Demand on Brisket

Not only did the barbecue style give value to a previously discarded meat cut, but it also encouraged more restaurants to offer it on their menus.

In recent years, barbecue restaurants have significantly contributed to the increased demand for brisket. One of the leading chains offering brisket, Dickey's has more than 600 locations in total, making it the largest single purchaser of this meat cut.

As early as 2014, [Arby's](#) was accused of increasing demand because of its new brisket sandwich. Even more, some restaurants have started "panic-buying" as they reopened after the pandemic.

The high demand for brisket has made more restaurants like [Cotton Patch Cafe](#) enter the game despite the skyrocketing costs.

However, all restaurants seem to struggle to keep their menu prices stable despite the rising expenses.

For instance, Brother Jimmy's decided to position brisket dishes as a delicacy item. This way, they get to serve a limited number of this dish, and when it's over, the staff would encourage customers to choose other reputable dishes.

To avoid the negative impact of prices, Cotton Patch Cafe has tried to alert its customers of the potential price increase. They also introduced dishes with a twist on brisket, still offering a high value to customers.

## More Ethnic Groups in America

Previously, the American taste defined the prices of meat cuts, depending on demand. For instance, beef liver used to be a cheap cut, like brisket.

Nowadays, however, those previously disliked cuts are expensive and rarely available due to demographic changes. More ethnic groups, like Asians, are growing in American society.

Other meat cuts that are loved by Asian populations are oxtails and tongues. There are entire restaurants dedicated to tongue dishes in Japan.

Brisket is especially popular in Korean cuisine. For instance, there are American variations of the widely-cooked [Bulgogi](#) requiring brisket.

### More Brisket in South Korea

Not only did Koreans increase the demand for brisket in America, but they also spiked the global demand. Some observers attribute this to the rising living standards in Asian countries, which makes meat more accessible to locals.

More Asians are eating beef, but their climate doesn't allow for raising cattle. As a result, countries like South Korea and China have turned to importing large amounts of beef in response to local demand.

Much of the brisket in Australia, Argentina, and Brazil is sent to South Korea. So, the supply of brisket is limited in beef-exporting countries for this reason, which raises their prices locally.

It's not easy to find brisket at local Australian stores and their prices are beyond affordable. Then, more obviously, these prices will be mirrored in the U.S. market.

## 2. Low Brisket Supply

We've mentioned various reasons behind the soaring demand for brisket.

However, brisket supply has been fairly stable for years. Unfortunately, the supply has dropped recently because of the drought and the pandemic.

Here are the details of the meat supply situation.

### Limited Brisket per Steer

To start with, you can expect around [500 pounds of meat](#) from a steer weighing 1,200 pounds. This should give you an idea of how much weight is lost during the trimming and deboning process.

As for the brisket, its average weight is around 30 pounds, if the steer was unchilled. After processing, you can expect the brisket to weigh anywhere between eight to twenty pounds.

Now, let's take a deeper look at the brisket cut. As you might already know, two muscles make up the brisket; the point and the flat cut.

The flat cut is given its name because it lays flat. It's also commonly called the "first cut." Since it's topped with a thick layer of fat, the moisture and tenderness remain while cooking.

Additionally, because the flat cut is thick, you can easily offer it as sliced servings or as homemade corned beef. This is why the flat cut is more in demand, so you can expect it to go off the shelf sooner than other meat cuts.

Since the flat cut makes up the majority of the brisket, there would be fewer pounds remaining for other customers. So, how many pounds of brisket would you expect a customer to request?

Truth is that it depends on the typical consumption of a person, which varies between different families and regions. What you need to know is that the brisket will lose around half its weight during the cooking process.

Typically, customers would order one pound of brisket per person. So, if they're inviting 50 of their friends over to a barbecue party, they would order at least 40 pounds of fresh meat, if not more.

All in all, a single steer naturally produces a few pounds of brisket, compared to its weight. This amount doesn't meet the generous servings Americans are used to, especially in [Texan cuisine](#).

So, the supply was initially far less than the demand, regardless of recent economic changes. The problem is that when there's such a limited portion of a meat cut per animal, a slight increase in demand would strongly affect the price.

## The Pandemic

The initial wave of COVID-19 [drastically affected meat-processing plants](#) because of labor shortages and less demand for restaurant food. So, the producers requested significantly lower volumes of meat from farmers.

The situation continued for long enough that farmers had to adjust their plans to lower the costs of raising cattle. In response, farmers gradually thinned their herds, thus arriving at a point where there were fewer cattle by the time restaurants were reopening.

Some observers speculate that the prices will drop again when the farmers manage to grow their herds once more. Yet, the process might take around five years until the herd sizes meet the growing demand for meat.

## The Drought

For almost two years, [record-breaking temperatures](#) have affected 40 percent of the United States, especially in the west. For this reason, farmers are struggling even more to grow their herds in extremely challenging climatic conditions.

Last summer was ranked as the third hottest on record in America. Farming regions, such as Nebraska, have seen their third driest period. The average precipitation went as low as 5.8 inches.

The temperatures reaching up to 100 degrees in September have turned stretches of lush cropland and pasture into lands of ruined soybeans, corn, and milo. This is because the soaring temperatures have triggered wildfires that fed on acres of crops.

Additionally, vital water sources have dried up, including ponds, streams, and rivers. As a result, ranchers were forced to drive miles in order [to source water for their herds](#). This obviously adds fuel costs to a local industry that's already struggling with inflation.

Added to that, ranchers are spending more money on tools to help their animals survive the hot weather, such as cooling mists. If the winter doesn't come with enough precipitation, farmers would likely reduce their herd sizes even further.

### 3. Economic Changes

Supply and demand are among the most obvious reasons for the higher brisket prices. However, there are a number of unexpected changes that took place below the surface.

Let's start our investigation into the culprits making brisket unaffordable.

#### Untrimmed Brisket Is Still Affordable

Thirty years ago, the brisket was considered a discarded meat cut. Commonly, expensive meat cuts are either more tender or they can be cooked easily.

Untrimmed brisket is still one of the moderately-priced meat cuts. It costs [around \\$7](#) which is significantly less than Bnls Ribeye Steak, having double the price.

This is because brisket comes from the breast muscles of the cow, which support 60 percent of its weight. As a result, this meat cut is tough, making it difficult to cook. It was only after the barbecue style gained traction that recent consumer trends changed the game.

The long cooking process tenderizes the tough muscle tissues, but it also wastes half of the meat's weight. This is an additional reason for increasing its price.

#### Brisket Costs are Higher

We've learned that the demand by restaurants has spiked brisket prices. Yet, restaurants are also increasing their prices because of rising costs.

There's a general labor shortage that has become worse because of the pandemic. As we all know, there had been major employee lay-offs during that period, which made them seek alternative career paths.

As a result, labor costs have increased in the past few years. Butcheries and restaurants need skilled labor for the brisket trimming process, which takes time and considerable effort, as we'll learn later.

Other costs that have increased during recent years include:

- Costs of Rubs (\$1.55 per pound)
- Hickory wood (\$1.58 per pound)
- Transportation costs

### Meat Packers Increased Their Profits

Not to put all the blame on external factors, the economic advisers of the White House have had their own investigation.

Towards the end of 2021, the advisers accused some of the biggest meat companies in the United States of increasing their profits.

Since the pandemic started, they managed to [triple their profit margins](#) as documented in their financial statements.

At the same time, the big companies have underpaid the farmers. The overall result was an increase in all meat prices. Higher labor and transportation costs were insignificant, compared to the increase in profit margins of the big companies.

### Less Competition among Meat Packers

We all expect that the competition between producers should lower the prices of meat. However, in the case of the American meat market, only four companies provide most of the meat.

Those meat-processing companies control 55 to 85 percent of the American meat market. So, they can charge whatever prices they want without fearing backlash from consumers.

Even though some costs, like labor, have dropped after the pandemic, the meat-processing companies didn't lower their product prices.

## 4. Brisket Cooking Is Costly

In the previous sections, we took a comprehensive view of the world. Now that we're done with our travel around the globe, let's zoom into the kitchen.

This section tells the story of the artists behind the brisket. There are several layers to the craft of a brisket dish.

Although brisket is an inexpensive meat cut, it's costly to elevate such tough meat cut into the standard of tenderness that everybody admires. It's like turning Sardine into a restaurant-style dish!

Here's why the effort is worth paying for.

## Why Is Brisket Trimming Expensive?

[Brisket trimming](#) is a costly process because it takes time and skill to hone the intricate balance. If you're going to do it yourself, it'll only cost you some precious time on the weekend.

Trimming brisket isn't that straightforward. You need to remove just the right amount of fat to ensure there's still enough on the surface to keep the meat's moisture.

You can make this process faster, but the outcome wouldn't be up to the level. The unprofessional way is to remove the fat after smoking by scraping it off.

This method is much easier because the fat has melted. However, if you use this method, you'll sacrifice the smokey flavor that has been absorbed by the fat during all those grilling hours.

Now, put yourself in a restaurant owner's shoes. How much will you have to pay an experienced cook for this process? Definitely a lot. It would take even more as the number of customers increases.

There's no wonder those expenses would be reflected in the menu prices.

## Why Is Brisket Smoking Expensive?

As we mentioned earlier, the brisket is made up of the toughest muscles supporting more than half of the animal's body weight, including the horns and the hooves.

To [tenderize these tough muscles](#), you'll need to cook them low and slow on indirect heat, like a grill, oven, or slow cooker.

This probably varies depending on the brisket weight and the level of doneness you prefer. For instance, a brisket weighing 16 pounds will take around 10 to 12 hours of cooking at 275°F.

Still, we need to note that you can't just leave the brisket and sleep. Most commonly, you'll need to check it halfway through.

After some hours of cooking, some people would prefer wrapping their brisket to prevent it from drying. In all cases, it takes skill and dedication to bring out a brisket masterpiece, which plays a major role in hiking up its price.

## Wrap Up

Why is brisket so expensive?

There are numerous factors behind the soaring prices of this meat cut.

Simply put, brisket has become expensive because of the rising demand, limited supply from producers, and the costly cooking process. There's also a list of unexpected economic changes that happened since the pandemic.

We've demonstrated that brisket isn't just a meat cut. It's proof of the dramatic changes that took place over the last few years.

Let's be honest, though, most of us weren't aware of brisket until it became popular. Now that there's less for all, we've got to accept that sharing is caring.