

UP SOUTH



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: A barbecue pork sandwich at Johnson's Southern Style BBQ in Harrisburg; A barbecue pork sandwich at Dixie Bar-B-Que in Jonesboro; A barbecue pork sandwich at Shemwell's Bar-B-Que in Cairo.

BIG TRADITION IN LITTLE EGYPT

Sliced barbecue pork sandwiches in southern Illinois


BY TITUS RUSCITTI

FOR DECADES, THE LATE MIKE Mills was the face of southern Illinois barbecue. His 17th Street Barbecue restaurant put the town of Murphysboro on the map. A Memphis in May champion, he was an ambassador for the region and its people. But his backyard is rarely mentioned as a barbecue bastion. This is a mistake, for pitmasters here serve a distinctive dish, worthy of notice and study: the sliced barbecue pork sandwich.

Southern Illinois might as well be the South. "Little Egypt," the area bounded by the Ohio, Mississippi, and Missouri

rivers, has been a cultural isolate since before the Civil War. A tour of some of the area's older spots, combined with a dive into the region's barbecue history, gives us a peek into a part of the country that has never been eager for change. Order a barbecue sandwich here and you'll probably be served tender smoked pork that's smoothly sliced like sandwich meat. A few of the longer established places in the area serve that pork with an orange sauce often mixed with vinegar, tomato juice, and other ingredients that are closely kept secrets. While neither a sliced pork

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sandwich nor orange sauce is unique, the combination of the two is compelling. And the best place to taste that combination is here in Little Egypt. Travel this part of Illinois and you recognize that even in this moment, when chain barbecue is on the rise, odd cultural cul de sacs persevere.

At Dixie Barbecue in Jonesboro, Jennifer and Richard York have been smoking boneless hams on Wednesdays since 1966. Jennifer's family bought the restaurant that year, and the recipes came with it. Boneless hams arrive midweek from their longtime supplier. Richard and his crew smoke them over hickory wood in the restaurant's original pit. The next day, they slice the meat a quarter-inch thick. Before serving, the sliced pork is lightly reheated on a hot flattop to crisp the edges.

Pulley's in Marion, founded in 1923, served a similar sandwiched until it closed in 2007. A local landmark, it was the spot for barbecue, pie, and socializing. Local lore goes it had one of the country's first drive-through windows, which was really just a door in the back where customers could drive up to place their to-go orders. Some say the drive-through was born during Prohibition, to cater to local bootleggers.

The town of Cairo (pronounced Kay-row), forty miles south of Jonesboro, sits where the Mississippi and Ohio rivers converge. The area boomed in the 1800s thanks to river trade and the Illinois Central Railroad. It declined over the twentieth century for economic and social reasons, including a troubled history of race relations and multiple instances of racial terror against the area's Black residents.

Luther Cash Shemwell opened his place here in the 1940s. He was a well-known pitmaster in the area and ran a few spots over the years before turning

a former laundry into Shemwell's Barbecue. The crew here slices with an electric carver and toasts the white bread sandwiches on a sandwich press. The sauce is neon orange in color and vinegar-forward in flavor, with the consistency of mayonnaise.

The small town of Harrisburg is a straight twenty-five-mile shot west of Marion. Rupert Johnson, a fourth-generation African American pitmaster, stands tall in the pits at Johnson's Southern Style Bar-B-Q. His family left the Deep South and brought their barbecue traditions here with them. Born and raised in the region, Rupert opened Johnson's Southern Style Bar-B-Q in Harrisburg in 1984. Though he plans to pass the business to his granddaughter soon, he can often be found in the back, hand slicing the meat, smoked from hams sourced from a nearby farm. He insists that the practice of hand-slicing smoked meat is "a dying technique" that was once more prevalent across the country. One can still find sliced pork sandwiches in pockets farther south, like Birmingham and eastern Tennessee. (Ridgewood Barbecue in Bluff City, Tennessee, is one well-known example.) Johnson says that resting, then slicing the meat takes longer than pulling or chopping, but results in a juicier sandwich.

Over the last generation, coal mining and other drivers of the local economy have declined. Facing down economic changes, the people of southern Illinois now look to culture for continuities. In Little Egypt, sliced barbecue, smothered in an orange-colored sauce, is one of those continuities. For locals who have stuck around, and for intrepid barbecue pilgrims, these sandwiches are a totem of home and region. ♡

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