



Daniel Vaughn

# GREASE BALLS OF SOUTHEAST TEXAS

THE NOT-SO-FAMOUS BEEF LINKS OF PATILLO'S BAR-B-Q

by Daniel Vaughn

**P**ATILLO'S BAR-B-Q IN BEAUMONT, TEXAS, is the fourth-oldest barbecue joint in the state. You've probably never heard of it. Founder Jack Pat(t)illo is believed to be a direct descendant of one of the earliest Texas settlers, George Alexander Pattillo. The recipes they still use today came from a woman who traced her ancestry to the McFaddins, a powerful local family who amassed wealth from land and cattle. These family ties aren't simple, and the stories behind them don't figure into Patillo's marketing strategy.

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Robert Patillo; A Patillo's beef link, or grease ball.

Robert Patillo runs the restaurant now in a wooden structure his forebears built in 1950. He hand-stuffs the same spicy beef links that his great-grandfather Jack Pat(t)illo cooked when he opened the doors in 1912. Robert Patillo says that Jack married into the recipe by way of his second wife, Roxie, in 1907. (She made him drop one of the "t's"

to become Patillo.) Five years later they opened a small restaurant together downtown, cooking with recipes from Roxie's mother. The thin, gravy-like barbecue sauce they still make was hers, says Robert. And "she developed the all-beef link, and that's the way it has always been made."

Texans revere their state's century-old barbecue joints. Visits

to the central Texas stalwarts of Kreuz Market in Lockhart, Prause Meat Market in La Grange, or Southside Market in Elgin are prized check marks on a barbecue tourist list. So why don't you know about Patillo's?

The location in often-overlooked Beaumont doesn't help. If you told everyone in Austin that Beaumont was part of Louisiana, half of them would believe you. Beaumont's only claim to fame is Spindletop, an oil well that went dry in the 1930s.

Patillo's most famous menu item is an all-beef sausage link stuffed in beef casing and imbued with a heavy hit of garlic. Locals call them "grease balls," and the nickname likely repels some diners. I asked Robert Patillo, now sixty-seven, if being overlooked on barbecue best-of lists bothered him, given the long history of the place. "After I got to be a certain age, I don't want to have that stress on me," he said.

I could blame geography or beef fat for Patillo's relative anonymity, but I know it's neither. The Patillos were dismissed before they even started selling

links. According to family lore, Jack Patillo was the son of George Alexander Pattillo and his black housekeeper. His name doesn't show up on the otherwise-heralded Pattillo family lineage. Roxie's mother, Martha McFaddin, was the half-black daughter of a housekeeper and a patriarch of the wealthy McFaddin clan. To distance herself from the family, she used the name Martha Mack.

Robert Patillo, with fair skin and wavy white hair, sat across a table from me. I was embarrassed to ask, but I wanted to know how he identified himself. "I'm black," he said. "Back in the time when I was born, there wasn't any mixed. You were black or white." As he talked, it hit me that Patillo's is the oldest African American-owned barbecue joint in the state. I realized the disservice I've done to Texas by not crowing enough about Patillo's history—or their beef links, which are unique to southeast Texas.

The sausages start with a beef casing instead of pork. It's tougher to chew, so most squeeze the contents out onto bread the way you might work a toothpaste tube or

Entries for Patillo's in the 1914 (l) and 1957 (r) Beaumont city directories

**American National Bank**  
We Invite You to Visit Our Bar

BEAUMONT 1914

488 Patillo Jack (c), restr  
cor Norvel-Wilder Hdw Co  
Bowie intersects  
Patillo (c), clothes

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**PATILLO'S BARBECUE STAND (Frank E Patillo) Barbecue for Parties, Table Service for White Folk, 720 Railroad av, Tel TErMinal 2-2572**

**PATILLO'S JACK BARBECUE STAND (Jack F Patillo) Good Barbecued Meats, Chicken, Pork, Beef and Links, Catering to Parties and Picnics, Barbecue to Go and Dining Room Service, 2775 Washington blvd, Tel TErMinal 3-3154**

a link of boudin. Unlike the restrained salt-and-pepper seasonings of German- and Czech-style sausages in central Texas, these links hit you with garlic and leave you with the heat of black and red pepper and chili powder. And don't forget the fat. These aren't lean sausages. The bright red, molten "juice" that runs out when you crack one open gave grease balls their nickname.

There are easier ways to make it in the barbecue business than by hand-stuffing 500 links every other day. They grind the beef in-house. Robert oversees the quality control: "I even taste a spoonful of the raw meat after it's ground up and the seasoning is mixed in," he said. "I don't spit it out."

Patillo's Bar-B-Q has survived despite devastating hurricanes and moves all over town. By 1945, the business had expanded to a second location under Frank (Jack Jr.) Patillo, Robert's grandfather. His willing tutelage helped to spread the famous link to other establishments around Beaumont and eventually to Houston. It's likely that the Patillos created a tradition of sausage making that has survived for a century.

At *Texas Monthly*, we evaluate barbecue joints according to brisket. It's a common fallback position for writers and barbecue fans alike, a rating system anchored in the legendary, and mostly white-owned, joints of

central Texas. If the brisket isn't any good, then the restaurant is only worthy of moderate praise. And if a barbecue joint doesn't have great brisket, it won't make our Top 50 lists.

But what if another menu item is a culinary treasure that goes back a hundred years? Until now, joints like Patillo's have not received the considerable attention that comes along with top rankings. I've come to realize that it's an outdated way of thinking. It's like judging a deli solely on its poor pastrami, even if it has the world's best corned beef sandwich, or requiring that Tom Brady also be good at basketball before we call him a great athlete.

Patillo's does not serve brisket. Chicken, ribs, and those all-beef links are the stars—and after that, if you still have room, the personal-sized pies are excellent. There's a chicken mounted to the roof, not a steer. Sliced beef, carved from shoulder clod, is a newer addition to the menu. The only brisket in the building ends up in the sausage.

Beaumont is a long way from central Texas, where sliced brisket is king. That shouldn't make Patillo's an afterthought. After all, they've been making spicy beef links a lot longer than brisket has been on anyone's menu in Texas. Those sausages—and their history—deserve our respect. 🍷

*Daniel Vaughn is the barbecue editor for Texas Monthly and the author of The Prophets of Smoked Meat.*

## POP CULTURE

TRAVIS MILTON'S SOUTHERN SODA VINEGARS

by Emily Hilliard



Stephanie Breijo

**T**RAVIS MILTON GREETs ME at the door of his Richmond, Virginia, house, bearded and burly in a plaid shirt, horn-rimmed glasses, and a "Virginia is for Lovers" ball cap. Peeking out from his rolled-up shirt sleeve is a tattoo of his great-grandfather's farm logo surrounded by vegetables. He offers me whiskey before I'm through the door, and I spy his collection of Star Wars and Ghostbusters action figures in the next room. As we cross the hall, he reverently points out his grandmother's last written recipe hanging in a small wooden frame among family photos and album covers—Rick James, Hank Williams, and Thin Lizzy.

*Travis Milton's rainbow of fermentation*

In the living room, he's piled at least a dozen notebooks of varying sizes on the coffee table, their open pages revealing scrawled handwriting and sketches of kitchen layouts. I've heard about these notebooks before. When I first met Travis

at Comfort, where he was executive chef, he told me that he keeps nineteen journals in various locations—restaurant kitchen, home kitchen, glove compartment, and nightstand. When ideas strike, he records them before they flit away.