

A close-up photograph of a person's hands pouring a thick, red barbecue sauce from a bottle onto a plate of food. The plate contains a white bowl of shredded, sauced meat, a piece of roasted meat, and several golden-brown fried items. The person is wearing a white and green striped shirt. The background is slightly blurred, showing a wooden table and a fork and knife on a napkin.

PASSPORT

# AMERICAN BARBECUE: A SAFE PLACE TO LAND

In Brussels and Amsterdam, barbecue done right

BY AMANDA YEE

SHORTLY AFTER I MOVED TO COPENHAGEN IN 2015, THE POLITICAL CLIMATE of the country changed. Denmark is known globally for its socially progressive politics and is one of the first countries to legalize gay marriage and secure women's rights. However, thinking that forced assimilation of "non-ethnic" Danes and immigrants would help to protect Danish culture, the deterioration of Black, Brown, Indigenous, and Muslim collective memories seemed to be the agenda of Denmark in all aspects of life, including food. During my time in Copenhagen, anti-immigration sentiments began to cement politically, and politicians with nationalist and anti-immigration platforms were elected. Qualified people with traditionally Muslim names were less likely to get a call back for an interview. The Danish government began labeling areas with high populations of immigrants as "ghettos." The United Nations Commission on Human Rights highlighted unconstitutional Danish policies which included displacing innocent immigrants and refugees, and putting them in internment-like camps with conditions that were worse than the rehabilitative prisons of which Denmark boasted.

As a Black American, I was welcomed in Copenhagen. To Danes, I possessed all the cool Californians were known for; the beauty of transracial identity, which they hoped would help attest to their delusions of being anti-racist; and a profitable story of which they were mostly unaware. Yet, the barrage of racism, Islamophobia, and xenophobia was exhausting and distracting for people who looked and lived like me, but were not American. It wasn't enough that we had to deal with larger aggressions, which affirmed that we were not at home in Denmark. Inuit people begged for Denmark not to use the derogatory term "Esk\*mo" when labeling desserts. Danish chocolatiers doubled down on calling a ball of cream dipped in chocolate "N-word buns."

After tasting one too many things flavored with licorice or sea buckthorn, ingredients heavily used in New Nordic cuisine, I felt like a prisoner in Plato's cave. Food served in Copenhagen seemed to be a shadow of real meals. When I complained of kombucha being flat or bitter or of tacos being soggy, I was offered fine dining that Copenhagen had built its name upon. "Yeah, but have you tried Noma?" people would say. As if tasting René



ABOVE: The woodpile in the Holy Smoke basement; OPPOSITE: Inside Brandon Woodruff's Pendergast, a patron partakes of the smoked turkey accompanied by creamy mac 'n' cheese and cornbread muffins.

Redzepe's celeriac shawarma was a racism cure-all for white Danes who refused to make space for others and their cuisines. Danish appropriations of anti-colonial and ethnic foods failed miserably, in taste and in the preservation of collective communal memories. American barbecue, founded on the principles of migration and African American story and expertise, was no exception. Barbecue in Copenhagen was a pity not worth writing about, but in the spirit of spilling just a little tea, I will say that their understanding of large slabs of meat, seasoned and cooked over fire, is dry and flavorless. Good food should invoke the safety, joy, and celebration of belonging. Instead, the food I experienced in Scandinavia made me feel wildly unseen.

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I TOOK A WEEKEND trip through Europe and met with Agathe Legrand and Gabriel Ejenbaum, the owners of Holy Smoke, a Texas-style barbecue place in Brussels, Belgium, and Brandon Woodruff, the owner of Pendergast, a Kansas City-style barbecue restaurant in Amsterdam. At first, I was skeptical because of my experience in Denmark. Could these restaurants uphold the stories of migration, flavor, and history built by American Black folk?

When I bit into Gabriel and Agathe's tender, smoky, and juicy brisket, I wondered how these French people at Holy Smoke were able to capture the spirit of generosity and innovation of barbecue. When I sat down with Agathe, she was bubbly and pregnant. The ambiance, of rich leathers, woods, brick, and concrete, was warm and assuring. In a playful, 1980s Americana fashion, a wooden placard of a wolf graced the walls. Gabriel is also Agathe's romantic partner, but she refers to him as her "associate" when she's on the clock.

She tells me of how Gabriel would travel to the United States as a kid, making his own sort of migration to Texas. The generosity of the barbecue community resonated with him. Strangers welcomed him and fed him large portions of tenderly cooked meats. The openness shown made him feel like family. Gabriel knew that he had to create a space in Europe similar to what he found in Texas. The





Holy Smoke pork ribs;  
OPPOSITE: Outside  
Pendergast in Amsterdam



LEFT: Pendergast loinback ribs with cornbread muffins and pickled purple carrots; RIGHT: Gabriel heads down to the basement to get wood for his smoker.

couple only started selling barbecue five years ago as a pop-up at community events, but their lifestyle of living low and slow transcended their imported wood-fired J & R smoker and was evident in the years it took for them to perfect their carnivorous offerings.

Gabriel and Agathe left corporate jobs and made the sacrifices necessary to learn the restaurant business and American barbecue. Agathe waited tables, learning the front of the house, and Gabriel started on the bottom rung of notable restaurants so that he could acquire discipline and kitchen rigor. They made long trips to visit Texas barbecue restaurants like Franklin Barbecue in Austin. Barbecue pitmasters shared their secrets. When Gabriel and Agathe felt ready to open as a brick and mortar, they migrated from France to Belgium, where Gabriel held childhood memories of grilling meat with family. For them, nothing matters more than the brisket and ribs. They painstakingly source and import the meat, so that patrons can experience genuine barbecue. Though they are hesitant to call themselves pitmasters, they are constantly striving for the perfect bite. The ribs and brisket have texture, moisture, and smoke and are packed with umami. Then comes sweet, followed by hints of sour. The salt and pepper work to highlight all of its flavor

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components. I hummed a little happy tune and swayed in joy while eating the Meat Lovers plate, loaded with pork ribs, sausage, brisket, house-made coleslaw, zucchini pickles, cornbread, potatoes in smoked butter, and a side of house-made sauces. I loved their potatoes with pickled red onions. The broiled and creamy bone marrow, graced with hints of vanilla, went down smoothly with a shot of whiskey. While eating at Holy Smoke, I could see myself and my people in the foods that were historically ours. I felt taken care of.

**NAMED AFTER** Thomas Pendergast, a Kansas City, Missouri, political boss who cultivated and sustained nightlife during Prohibition, Brandon Woodruff's place



Brisket rests on the smoker at Holy Smoke.

in Amsterdam is welcoming and thoughtful. A native of Kansas City, Missouri, Brandon migrated almost twenty years ago for love. Wrestling with existential questions after his mother passed in 2013, he began to evaluate what he was doing with his days. Having grown up with barbecue, pursuing it felt natural. Instead of playing it safe with a regular nine-to-five job in Amsterdam, this queer American man would work to offer something that he could wholeheartedly give to his Dutch community.

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He tracks memory, culture, language, time, and place, all through food. He is adamant about getting Kansas City barbecue just right. His pig cheeks and ribs are Duroc, as they possess high marbling. His sauce is purposefully left without molasses, only brown sugar, as he is committed to staying true to the KC barbecue school of mild sauce. One of his influences was Gates Bar-B-Q, which has sold barbecue in Kansas City, Missouri, since 1946. Brandon finds a great deal of inspiration from Gates, but he serves barbecue on porcelain plates instead of the Styrofoam boxes he recalls from his childhood. He likes to treat his patrons as if they are coming over to his house for dinner. He extends the table to vegans, serving house-made barbecue seitan that resembles burnt ends. The dish has so much tooth, flavor, and texture, it could fool the strictest of carnivores into loving it.

For Brandon, the exact moment of



Brandon offers a toast in celebration of new friends and good food.

feeling at home is when the bark is burnt off past the point of being singed. To get there, he uses applewood in his Ole Hickory smoker. His sides attest to his loyalty to family. He uses the vinegar-based dressing his grandmama showed him how to make for his coleslaw and whips up his mother's recipe for gooey butter cake—lemony, with a crisp top. Telling his story through barbecue is about honoring his upbringing in Kansas City. When I ate The Spread—a smorgasbord of loinback ribs, brisket, and pulled pork necks, accompanied by mac 'n' cheese, baked beans, and smoky garlic mashed potatoes, I felt as though I was reading a chapter in his memoir. The ribs were divinely and meticulously seasoned and dressed with barbecue sauce. I was sad when I realized

there was only one rib left on the tray (which I offered to my friend so that I would not appear greedy), and sucking my fingers clean of rib remnants would have to suffice.

My time at both barbecue places reminded me of what theologian Henri Nouwen wrote in his book *Reaching Out*, "...[Hospitality] is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines." As an immigrant sometimes uncertain about where I belong, I felt as if my escape from Plato's cave led me straight into a plate of fall-off-the-bones ribs at Pendergast and supple and smoky brisket at Agathe and Gabriele's Holy Smoke. For the first time in a long time, I felt seen. 🍷

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