



BAR TABS AND BOTTOM LINES

Is the barbecue restaurant business
looking at a booze-soaked future?

by HANNA RASKIN
Illustrations by Emily Wallace

IN THE LATE 1700s, VIRGINIAN DUDLEY MITCHUM MOVED DOWN THE Great Wagon Road as a member of The Travelling Church, buying 500 acres of farmland in Kentucky. ¶ At Maple Hill, the grass was blue, the water was clear, and the soil was fertile. By the time Mitchum died in 1831, his estate was valued at roughly \$15,000, the equivalent of half a million dollars today. Unlike most of his contemporaries, Mitchum owned a canopy bed, a dozen chairs, and a pair of spectacles.



But it wasn't feasible to cart around all those belongings, so Mitchum needed another way to let strangers know that his bankroll was bigger than theirs. His beakers smithed by Asa Blanchard—an artisan known to collectors as “the Paul Revere of the South”—no doubt did the trick.

As Daniel Ackermann of the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts put it, “Think about a time before plastic cups and Yeti tumblers.” Back then, if a friend offered you a nip of brandy, you'd have to be ready with a receptacle to receive it. Most male citizens in nineteenth-century Kentucky were thus armed with beat-up tankards or earthenware cups.

But not Mitchum. This guy kept a monogrammed Asa Blanchard beaker in his pocket. And it's important to note that it was made of the same silver that served as coin in Mitchum's day. As Ackermann said, “It would be like using a dollar bill to eat cereal.”

Talk about a flex.

Showing off with silver and other fancy tableware is an old Southern tradition for those who can afford it. In Louis Manigault's ink drawing of a raucous 1754 Charleston dinner party, which has devolved into wig stealing and selfie posing, the punchbowl and glasses on the table leave no question about the diners' relationship to the exhausted-looking Black man pictured to the right. This is a gathering of the Lowcountry elite.

The men's jackets and fashionable buckled shoes communicate that same message, but

wealthy Southerners with status to flaunt have always invested in the finest platters, tureens, and fish forks. That's because they often supped on the same stewed pork, cornbread, and other humble preparations that their poorer neighbors ate, a circumstance of geography and limited transportation networks.

In other words, their table settings conveyed what their favorite foods couldn't. Mitchum may have enjoyed unaged corn liquor, but in a society seized by class anxiety, he sure wasn't about to enjoy it in a cracked stoneware mug.

Dickey's Barbecue Pit, the biggest barbecue franchise in the world, has lately come up with a different spin on drinking corn: the Bourbon Cheery Fizz, made with bourbon from Balcones Distilling in Waco, Texas. If a Fizz isn't your speed, Dickey's also now pours Hickory Old Fashioneds, sweet tea blended with peach whiskey, and vodka lemonade.

They're all part of a new bar program, which provides a gin-clear illustration of how important the open service of spirits has become to the barbecue business, a significant departure from the days when enterprising owners with access to hooch kept their sidelining out of the public eye. (Outside of restaurants, of course, booze and barbecue have always gone together.)

In an October 2021 press release announcing its liquor initiative, the company declared,

“Moving forward, all new Dickey’s Barbecue Pit owners and operators will have a full-service bar or beverage tub or cooler,” adding that existing operators could adopt bar service if they wished. That is, if they wished to pump up their sales by an estimated 10 to 15 percent.

As an inspirational example, the release described the patio that Arlington, Texas, franchisees David and Ashley Boisture recently built in anticipation of an influx of thirsty customers. It quoted CEO Laura Rea Dickey as saying, “We are happy for the Boistures...who see the potential to increase profits while offering guests a chance to stay a while, watch a game, and have fun.”

Now, any restaurateur can confirm that alcohol is a moneymaker. Compared to food, the margins are massive. And while the price of meat keeps climbing, the wholesale cost of beer, wine, and hard liquor has held relatively steady. But serving drinks is much more complicated than adding a few bottles of whiskey to the inventory list.

For one thing, it dramatically increases the chances of run-ins with a restaurant owner’s least favorite kinds of people: belligerent customers and government bureaucrats. For another, it

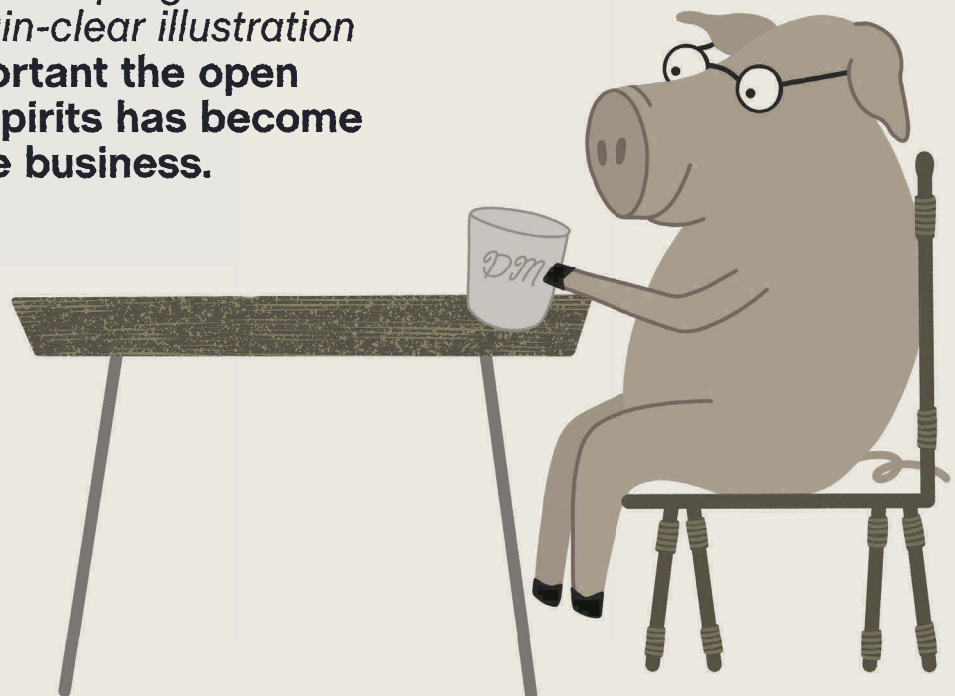
requires a total rethinking of space allocation, storage, and service logistics. Significantly, the easiest way to overcome all of the above is money and connections, which can create an added burden for Black restaurant owners, who are historically undercapitalized and excluded from circles of municipal power.

Wanting to learn more about why Dickey’s changed course after decades of peddling G-rated drinks, I rang up its corporate office. My messages were never returned, so I started emailing. I finally connected with a representative of the catering department who said she’d be happy to help if I wanted to order a big batch of beans, but she didn’t know anything about the company’s philosophical direction.

Still, a reporter hasn’t struck out until she’s knocked on a door. Accordingly, I paid Dickey’s headquarters a visit when I was in Dallas researching an unrelated story for *Gravy*—or at least that was my intention. But the high-rise floor with Dickey’s name on it isn’t accessible without a keycard, so I rode up and down in the elevator for a while, hoping a Dickey’s executive might come back from lunch.

I was in the elevator long enough that I got hungry myself. Eventually, I disembarked and

Dickey’s new bar program provides a gin-clear illustration of how important the open service of spirits has become to barbecue business.



went to Dickey's. I figured maybe the bartender could talk barbecue drinks with me.

Except when I got to Dickey's, it didn't have a bar. My beverage choices were a medium soft drink for \$2.25 or a "Big Yellow Cup" for \$2.95. The situation was the same at every Dickey's I checked out in the Dallas metro area: Customers who'd clocked out of work for a sandwich seemed satisfied with their iced tea and Barq's root beer.

And that's when I realized that the drinks lists at new-wave barbecue restaurants, and the chains hoping to emulate them, weren't designed just to boost the bottom line. Pit owners who program drinks such as the rum punch at Swig & Swine, the Tennessee Sour at Martin's Bar-B-Que Joint, or the amaro-tinged Pullstring Cowboy at Buxton Hall are taking their patrons' money, sure. But they're also giving guests an opportunity to feel a smidge superior to working-class barbecue fans.

When a barbecue customer asks for mezcabal with her pulled pork plate, she may well appreciate the comingling of smoke from both sides of the border. But she's also saying: "Hey, I'm not eating pig meat because it's convenient. I didn't get this coleslaw on the side because it's all I can afford. I partake of barbecue because I am a sophisticated connoisseur with a refined palate."

Remember Dudley Mitchum's silver beaker?

Alcohol can make restaurant owners rich and restaurant goers feel special, but it traditionally hasn't been a revenue stream into which barbecue sellers could so much as dip a toe.

At least, barbecue sellers in the Southeast have long been expected to stick to soft drinks, in accordance with prevailing community beliefs about faith and family. As is often the case, it's a whole different deal in Texas, where immigrants from Bohemia and Czechoslovakia didn't have any compunctions about beer. Even Dickey's harkened back to its 1941 origins as a "barbecue sandwich and ice-cold beer" stand when unveiling its bar plans.

In most other Southern states, barbecue and liquor didn't mingle. Throughout the nineteenth century, when barbecues were primarily group feeds hosted by politicians, civic organizations, or churches, it was understood that such events should be bone dry. In fact, it was not uncommon for barbecue attendees to toast temperance with cold water.

In 1844, a Madison, Georgia correspondent chronicled the gathering of 2000 Whig party members, many of whom wanted to make America moral again by mandating the Christian Sabbath and outlawing alcohol. They capped off their meeting with "a well-arranged and plentiful barbecue. The tables literally groaned beneath the weight of various well baked meats, immense loaves of cornbread and cake, which with pure water from the spring composed a feast."

Of course, there were exceptions. In 1926, at the height of Prohibition, the mayor of Union, South Carolina, went to an American Legion barbecue in the nearby town of Chester. As he later told a reporter, "A drunken fellow came up to me with a half-gallon fruit jar about one-fourth full of corn liquor and held it up to my lips. I pushed him away and told him that I didn't care for any of it. He then proceeded to pour it on my shoulder." The teetotaling Mayor E.D. Smith was so upset by the situation that he asked his Chester counterpart to have the man arrested; instead, Smith said, "They took me out to the ballgame and later to a lawn party."

When barbecue emerged as a commercial endeavor in the form of restaurants, relatively few of them sold alcohol. Cash-strapped pitmasters weren't about to court additional government oversight or risk running afoul of the Lord—or worse, potential customers who had a pretty good idea of what He would consider appropriate.

At Skylight Inn, opened by Pete Jones in Ayden, North Carolina, in 1947, beverage choices range from fountain Cheerwine to bottled Cheerwine. At first, Jones' grandson Sam thought he'd feature a similar lineup of soft drinks at Sam Jones BBQ, which he opened in Winterville in 2015. But then a mentor pointed out that a seven-seat lunch counter in the new building could function as a bar, serving beer and wine.

Sam's business partner, Michael Letchworth, told me that he immediately liked the idea: As a businessman, he'd rather install a beer cooler than lose a guest to Applebee's. But that's not how Sam's father saw it.

Letchworth told me, "Samuel's father is a Southern Baptist preacher, and his grandfather didn't drink, so having alcohol was frowned upon."

Plus, it wasn't just family members who were frowning. Letchworth said several elderly members of the predominantly Southern Baptist community were also disapproving of the scheme. I asked him



to explain what that kind of censure might look like, so I could better explain the nuances to folks who weren't brought up Southern Baptist.

He said there was one woman who went through the drive-through when Sam was working. When she got up to the window, she screamed, "You're going to hell!"

In terms of earthly accounting, beer and wine at Sam Jones BBQ weren't a runaway success. They ended up selling so little wine that they stopped carrying it, scaling back to just six local drafts. Letchworth says beer makes up about three-quarters of one percent of sales at the Winterville restaurant.

Contrast that with Sam Jones BBQ's second location, which opened in downtown Raleigh at the start of last year. According to Letchworth, at the new store, 8 to 10 percent of sales consistently stem from alcohol. "Which is helpful," he said.

In Winterville, the typical Sam Jones BBQ customer has a blue-collar job. For instance, Letchworth said, he might work for the power company. That means a three-Manhattan lunch could end in electrocution or a fatal fall. By contrast, folks in Raleigh seem to have jobs that they can do drunk.

After Letchworth resolved to develop a cocktail menu for Sam's Raleigh location, he made a pilgrimage to the barbecue restaurant hailed across the South as a pioneer on the bar front: Charleston-based Home Team BBQ, which now has half a dozen locations in cities from Columbia, South Carolina, to Aspen, Colorado. When Home Team opened its first restaurant in Charleston, owner Aaron Siegel was determined to replicate the best elements of the city's celebrated full-service restaurants, including a well-thought-out bar.

"It's not like you can wave a magic wand and have a bar business," Siegel said. "We put a lot of effort into it."

Their efforts paid off. The bar at Home Team's newest Charleston location runs fifty-four feet long. On the weekends, every seat at that bar is taken.

When Home Team opened a location on Sullivan's Island in 2009, it introduced the Gamechanger, a tiki-adjacent frozen cocktail that became the chain's signature drink. Based on a Painkiller, the Gamechanger combines two rums, two fruit juices, and cream of coconut. Letchworth said he believes this is precisely the type of cocktail—batchable, crowd-pleasing, evocative of a good time—that could surface on more barbecue menus in the next year or two.

He's not certain how many operators will end up offering alcohol, even though increased demand for it represents a rare chance to make barbecue more profitable. As he put it, "Some of these older places are set in their ways." After years of selling mostly sandwiches, their owners may not be accustomed to keeping careful records, which is essential when doling out drinks.

Yet if they wanted to try, he'd recommend mixing drinks that require no produce past an orange slice or maraschino cherry garnish, and leaning into the bourbon nostalgia that tends to overlap with interest in barbecue. That, and buying a frozen drink machine. Restaurant owners who don't want to fuss with liquor licenses could even skip the bourbon part.

Letchworth assured me that "there are wine-based slushie opportunities."

Just imagine how that drink might look in a silver beaker next to a full slab of ribs. 🍷

Hanna Raskin is a Gravy columnist. Her newsletter, The Food Section, is published on Substack.