

DIRECTOR'S CUT

Exterior side view of Fresh Air Barbecue, 2016



IF YOU BUILD IT

How innovation becomes tradition

BY JOHN T. EDGE

I OFTEN USE THE TERM “VERNACULAR.” Employed to describe language, it means native, indigenous, domestic. Applied to architecture and design, the term suggests that form follows function. Food is a kind of cultural language that makes possible daily human function. So, I’ve written about the “frugal roots of our vernacular cookery” and praised the “vernacular joys of shrimp and grits.” Recently, to make sense of why and how restaurants command my attention, I’ve been thinking more deeply about vernacular architecture and design.

I grew up near a prime example of the former: Old Clinton Bar-Q-Que, twelve miles northeast of Macon in Jones County, Georgia. Built in 1958 of concrete block, with a steep-pitched roof and a cedar-pillared front porch, wrapped in a ribbon of tin Coca-Cola signage, the restaurant appears so sure in its purchase on that red clay plat of land that I sometimes imagine it grew from a seedling on the shoulder of state highway 129.

In the late 1990s, after I moved from Georgia to Mississippi, when I first began to travel and write, I returned to Old Clinton to talk with Wayne Coultter, a son of founder Big Roy Coultter. Wayne had always intimidated me. But this time, I plunged in, asking the questions my Southern Studies degree prepared me to ask. I asked about the family roots of the barbecue the Coultters served. And I asked about the Black men I remember working the back end of the Old Clinton operation. I was earnest. I was full of myself. And I got nowhere. Until I talked to Wayne about Fresh Air Bar-B-Que, an hour up the road in Flovilla, Georgia.

Fresh Air began around 1929. After cooking on an earthen pit by the side of

the road, owner Joel Watkins built a brush arbor to gain shade. When the state paved the road, he added walls to make a roadside shebang into a restaurant. To soak up floor grease, he spread sawdust. In the early 1950s, he replaced the open pit with a poured concrete pit. And he connected the original building to another, creating a single low and long joint with a tin roof and a dog-leg pit. That combination of aesthetics and engineering came to be synonymous with great Georgia barbecue.

When I asked Wayne about Fresh Air, he hitched up his belt, smiled, and spoke of his father, saying, “He may have gone up there one day with a tape measurer to figure out how they did things.” Wayne was talking about the pit. He could have been talking about the building. From the late 1920s through the late 1950s, Fresh Air developed a building and a pit that served their functions so well that Old Clinton copied them. In the years since, Old Clinton added a new location



Behind the scenes at Fresh Air Barbecue, 2008

that referenced the same architectural style. As Fresh Air expanded to multiple locations, they replicated the pit.

Like a dogtrot house, a barbecue joint is the work of builders who adapt and innovate. When an innovation works, it

LEFT: Lee Coursey; RIGHT: Amy C. Evans



Outside Fresh Air Barbecue, 2008

gets adopted. In time, we redefine the most widely adopted innovations as traditions. And vernacular styles are born.

ON A SPRING road trip through western Kentucky, I thought about how that process applies to the tools cooks use, whether they work barbecue joints or hamburger stands. Seated at the counter at Ferrell's Snappy Service in Cadiz, I watched grill cook Sherry Dunning.

To smash balls of ground beef into rounds bound for the flattop, Sherry worked a modified brick trowel, purchased across the street at Fourshee Building Supply. A regular she knows as Peanut, retired from the post office, did the modification, clipping off one end. "It's heavier duty," she told me. "It's just a better tool."

When our burgers turned crusty, Sherry tucked them in squishy buns swabbed with mustard. To scrape the grill before the next batch, she reached for another tool. It looked like the sort of thing she would buy at a restaurant supply store. But my friend, who works in real estate redevelopment and knows construction, leaned over to tell me that it was a drywall knife.

A veteran of three decades at the grill, Sherry relies on tools designed for other purposes, adapted to suit her purposes. They showcase vernacular design. My hometown barbecue joint showcases vernacular architecture. From my perch at the counter at Ferrell's, burger in hand, grease and mustard dripping on the tissue placemat, I thought about both, and about the insightful ways humans adapt innovations to force traditions. 🍴

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Amy C. Evans