

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 I've come to realize that it's an outdated way of thinking.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. 🍷

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POP CULTURE

TRAVIS MILTON'S SOUTHERN SODA VINEGARS

by Emily Hilliard



Stephanie Breijo

TRAVIS 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.



SWEET ALCHEMY
Milton's classic soda arsenal



Nehi Orange
Columbus, GA



Dr. Pepper
Dublin, TX



Texas Sweet Peach
Dublin, TX

“Sunday is notebook-collating day,” he explains, gesturing toward the stack.

On a long farm table in the kitchen—amid a bushel of peaches, bright heirloom tomatoes, and two giant cushaw squashes—sits a lineup of Ball jars filled with neon-hued liquids. The half-dozen jars look like something out of Willy Wonka’s laboratory, had Willy Wonka gone country. The concoctions in these jars are the result of an idea Travis once scribbled in one of his notebooks: naturally fermented vinegars made from Southern sodas.

“I wanted to make pork barbecue with Cheerwine somehow, and I wanted it to be sour instead of sweet,” Travis says. He thought that turning Cheerwine into vinegar would be the easiest way to achieve that flavor. “Growing up in Appalachia, I’ve always said there’s two things you come out loving: black pepper and vinegar. It’s just kind of in our palates. I love vinegar, I love pickled things.”

He started experimenting with Cheerwine vinegar in other dishes, like vinegar pie, a classic Appalachian dessert. Initially he followed a simple fermentation process:

flattening the soda and letting it naturally ferment with airborne yeast, first becoming alcohol, then vinegar.

He wondered if he might try the same process with other beverages. While the Cheerwine he sourced was made with all sugar, other classic sodas—Peach Nehi, Mountain Dew, RC Cola, and Dr. Enuf—now contained high fructose corn syrup. Breaking that down proved a challenge for a simple vinegar mother. “It’s really tough for your average everyday yeast that’s flying around right now to fully break down the corn syrup before they die. So it really took a while before I got to the point where I thought okay, maybe I need to think of something that’s gonna be stronger,” he says.

The solution? Kombucha SCOBY. An acronym for “symbiotic culture of bacteria and yeast,” SCOBY is the thick, slimy mother that is used to brew the trendy health tonic, kombucha tea. Travis says, “It acts like a mother in a true sense: It not only nurtures the vinegar but it also protects it. You get that nice thick layer so if mold forms on the top of that, you can just take a spoon and scrape it off. If you can get a really, really solid SCOBY to start it with, you’re golden.”

The irony of pairing kombucha—one of the most naturally

occurring, localized, and healthful fermented foods—with highly processed, mass-produced sodas is not lost on Travis: “I’m taking this chemical test-tube thing and morphing it into something different using one of the most natural things in the world: yeast that’s floating around us,” he says. While the natural yeasts deconstruct the high-fructose corn syrup, the flavor of the sodas is preserved. That was crucial for Travis. “When I was

Coca-Cola vinegar, and marinated Chesapeake ray in a Sundrop brine. “One of my favorite things to do is a watermelon salad with house-made farmer’s cheese and Mountain Dew vinaigrette. The Mountain Dew just kind of pops against the watermelon, and it’s like sitting out on a porch in the summertime.”

Before I leave, Travis pours me a generous shot of Smooth Ambler Rye from Maxwelton, West Virginia. We chase it with



Mountain Dew
Knoxville, TN



NuGrape
Atlanta, GA



Frostie
Catonsville, MD



Nehi Peach
Columbus, GA



Cheerwine
Salisbury, NC

GROWING UP IN APPALACHIA, I’VE ALWAYS SAID THERE’S TWO THINGS YOU COME OUT LOVING: BLACK PEPPER AND VINEGAR. IT’S JUST IN OUR PALATES.

growing up in southwest Virginia, I’d come off the farm with my great-granddaddy and we’d go get an RC Cola and a Moon Pie, or get a bottle from the little make-shift fridge he kept stocked with Peach Nehi. That, Sundrop, and RC Cola were staples of everyday life for me.”

He plans to bring soda vinegars to his new restaurant, Shovel and Pick, when it opens in spring 2016. So far, he’s used the vinegars in chicken liver terrine topped with a Cheerwine vinegar gel and peanuts, beef tartare with

a sip of a new vinegar he’s experimenting with, made from an electric-blue cream soda called Frostie. While the taste is tangier than I remember, it instantly takes me back. “Blue Moon ice cream!” I shout. “I haven’t tasted that in years.”

Travis nods. “That, now that’s the powder off the outside of a Bazooka Joe.” His hypothesis sounds as boyishly confident as a quip by the ball-capped Joe on the bubblegum’s cartoon wrapper. I throw back another sip of the blue stuff, convinced. 🍷

Emily Hilliard is a folklorist and writer who works for Smithsonian Folkways and writes the pie blog Nothing in the House. Flip to the end of this issue for an illustrated guide to fermentation.



Travis Milton at home in Richmond, VA

Photographs by Stephanie Breijf