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FEATURES

ON THE COVER:
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RINGS OF FIRE

Why draw lines when there's room for everyone?

BY ADRIAN MILLER

Luis Villasmil/Unsplash

I'M A LATE BLOOMER WHEN IT comes to thinking about barbecue, about comprehensively giving shape to its economic, historical, and social dimensions. My deepest thinking about barbecue used to be, "Dang! That's really good!" Then, in 2002, I learned about the Southern Foodways Alliance. That year, I signed up for my first SFA event, the Taste of Texas Barbecue Field Trip.

So many good things came out of that experience. I fell in love with the SFA and its mission. I was welcomed into a community. I met many friends whom I still claim to this day. I got to know people who taught, and continue to teach, me about barbecue.

My stroke of genius was bringing along ziplock bags and a cooler so that I could gather leftovers from our visits. I knew the restaurants would overdose on hospitality, and I wanted to be prepared. Back home in Denver, my family was ecstatic when I laid out my feast on the dining room table. The trip also spurred me to research and write a book that celebrates African American barbecue culture and restores our rightful place in barbecue's storied history. This issue is a coda to that book, *Black Smoke*, published in April 2021.

Editing these essays got me thinking about the line-drawing that happens in barbecue. I'm not talking about the lines we form when waiting for ribs or brisket. I'm talking about the collective energy we put into disagreeing about what barbecue is, how it's made, who used cook it, who cooks it now, where it fits on a map, how it's spelled, and what it might look like in the future. Ultimately, barbecue's true terroir is common ground.

The best path to agreement is to steer away from saying barbecue is one thing. Barbecue, as you will read in the essays that follow, is many things. Sociologist John Shelton Reed channels an old-school vibe to take stock of the state of the cuisine. Writer Debra Freeman and photographer Joshua Fitzwater remind us of barbecue's Virginia bloodlines. This issue's contributors also blur, redefine, expand, and color outside of well-established lines. Titus Ruscitti gives us a glimpse of a lesser-known, hyper-local style of barbecue native to southern Illinois. Gustavo Arellano urges us to take a harder look at California's Santa Maria barbecue scene. Chefs Pierre Thiam and Amanda Yee show what can happen when barbecue gets a passport. We also

Ultimately, barbecue's true terroir is common ground.

expand barbecue's horizons. Latria Graham explores plant-based barbecue, Michael Twitty opens our eyes to kosher barbecue, and Farhan Mustafa puts a ritual Muslim goat feast in conversation with the pork barbecue of his Eastern North Carolina childhood. We shine a spotlight on Michelle Wallace, executive chef at Gatlin's BBQ in Houston, Texas, and John T. Edge explores barbecue vernacular architecture.

Expect a deep dive into the diverse world of barbecue, atypical of most food writing fare. In these pages, context shifts, imagination stretches, and one departs from barbecue norms. Yet, from all our exploration, we see the through lines that reconnect us and return us to the American South. At the end of our journey together, we give each other a knowing nod that there's plenty of room at the cookout for everyone.

Adrian Miller is a writer, lawyer, nonprofit director, and certified barbecue judge.

Fahmida Azim is an illustrator, storyteller, and night owl. She enjoys drawing real people living extraordinary lives, fictional people living beautifully ordinary lives, and food. Her work has been featured in *NPR*, *The New York Times*, *Vice*, and *Eater*. Her books include *Muslim Women Are Everything* (2020), *Amira's Picture Day* (2021), and *Samira Surfs* (2021). She grew up in Virginia, graduated from VCUarts, and now lives and creates in Seattle, Washington. Her favorite barbecue side dish is usually macaroni salad, but at a Desi barbecue it would be kachumber (Indian cucumber salad) with a side of raita.

Molly Brooks grew up in Nashville, Tennessee, and now lives in Brooklyn with her wife and cats. Her work has appeared in numerous magazines and newspapers, including *Nashville Scene*, the *Guardian*, *Kazoo* magazine, and *The Boston Globe*. She is the author and illustrator of the *Sanity & Tallulah* graphic novel series, as well as the illustrator for *Flying Machines: How the Wright Brothers Soared* by Alison Wilgus, and *Growing Pangs* by Kathryn Ormsbee. Visit her online at mollybrooks.com. As a vegetarian, barbecue side dishes are her main attraction, and she loves them all—especially potato salad.

Latria Graham is a journalist and fifth-generation South Carolina farmer. She is a contributing editor for *Garden & Gun*, *Outdoor Retailer*, and *Outside*, and has written longform pieces about everything from nature to NASCAR and yes, chitlins. After years of traveling the country to cover systemic injustice in underrepresented communities, she recently decided to turn her focus to small towns in the American South at risk of disappearing due to gentrification and suburbanization. You can find more of her work at LatriaGraham.com. She adores well-made baked beans. Sweet, spicy, tangy, saucy, and a little bit salty—what's not to like?

TOP TO BOTTOM: Courtesy of Fahmida Azim; Barbara Brooks; Courtesy of Latria Graham

S. Farhan Mustafa is a freelance writer by night and a product management director at an analytics company by day. Born and raised in Greenville, North Carolina, he started learning how to cook at the age of four, shadowing his mother and grandma. He's a former waiter, restaurant cook, and—briefly—a food critic. Farhan worked as an investigative journalist for *Al Jazeera English* during the Arab Spring. Later, he founded a venture-backed startup, Grafiti, that made data-driven insights accessible to anyone. He likes his barbecue with a side of corn sticks from Parker's in Greenville.

Pierre Thiam is a chef, author, and social activist best known for bringing West African cuisine to the global fine dining world. He is the executive chef of Nok by Alara in Lagos, Nigeria; the signature chef of the Pullman Hotel in Dakar, Senegal; and the executive chef and co-owner of Teranga, a fast-casual food chain from New York City. His company Yolélé Foods advocates for smallholder farmers in the Sahel by opening new markets for crops grown in Africa, such as fonio. Born and raised in Dakar, Senegal, Thiam now lives in El Cerrito, California, with his family. His favorite barbecue side dish is a grilled vegetable salad.

Amanda Yee is a Chinese, Norwegian, and African American immigrant chef from Oakland, California, living in Berlin, Germany. She has worked extensively in Californian and Danish restaurants while operating a community-based supper club called Five & Dime. She also writes, dabbles in food styling, and loves to surf. She was recently named creative director of 4 Color, chef Bryant Terry's imprint with Penguin Random House. The imprint's first book, *Black Food: Stories, Art, and Recipes from across the African Diaspora*, will be published in October 2021. She likes her barbecue with cornbread.

TOP TO BOTTOM: Courtesy of Farhan Mustafa; Sara Costa; Stine Christensen

MATT HORN IS A SELF-TAUGHT BARBECUE MAN. TO PERFECT HIS CRAFT, Horn drew on his family's Oklahoma barbecue heritage and underwent years of what he calls "research and development" with his grandmother's grill in his native Fresno, California. In 2017, Horn felt confident enough with his Southern-influenced barbecue to host pop-ups throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. He's now rooted in Oakland with an eponymous restaurant. Oakland is a wonderful example of how The Great Migration of African Americans brought, and continues to bring, Southern barbecue to the West Coast.

Horn Barbecue, *Oakland*

I opened my own barbecue takeout restaurant in October 2020. We open at 11 A.M., and there's usually a line of people waiting. Some of them have been camped out for hours. Our most popular menu items are beef brisket, beef ribs, and the house made hot links. I use several cooking techniques: dry aging our meat, cold smoking, and cooking directly over hot coals.

Lois the Pie Queen, *Oakland*

This soul food joint specializes in breakfast and lunch. I usually get the smothered chicken, yams, mac 'n' cheese, and the pies that they're known for. Their banana cream pie is my favorite. This is a great place with lots of character.

Alkali Rye, *Oakland*

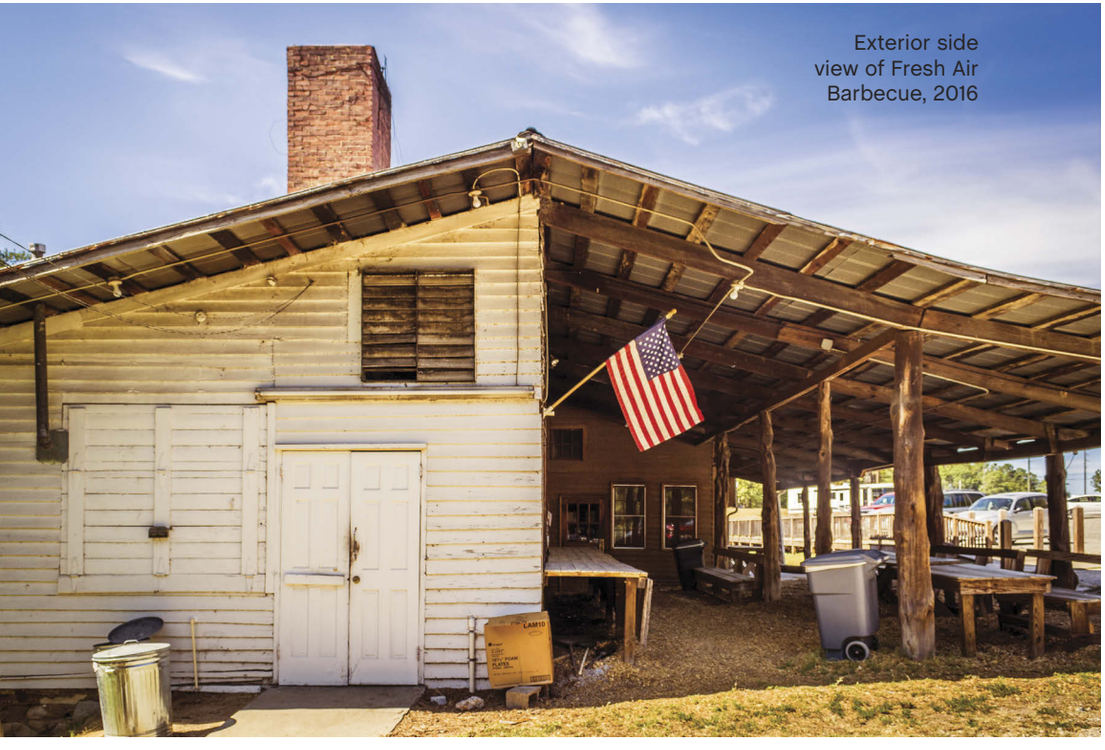
This is a fine bottle shop. I don't want to come off as an alcoholic, but I spend a lot of time there. That's where I go to get gifts, especially bourbon. I like what they're doing, the story that they're telling.

Tilden Park Golf Course, *Berkeley*

I like the solitude that going to the golf course affords me. You have to be patient with golf, and I like the challenge.

Illustrations by Bridgette Blanton / Tiny Pencil Studio

"Most Visited Places" is an ongoing digital and print series, underwritten by The Mountain Valley Spring Water.



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 Coulter, a son of founder Big Roy Coulter. 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 Coulters 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 that referenced the same architectural style. As Fresh Air expanded to multiple locations, they replicated the pit.

Behind the scenes at Fresh Air Barbecue, 2008

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."

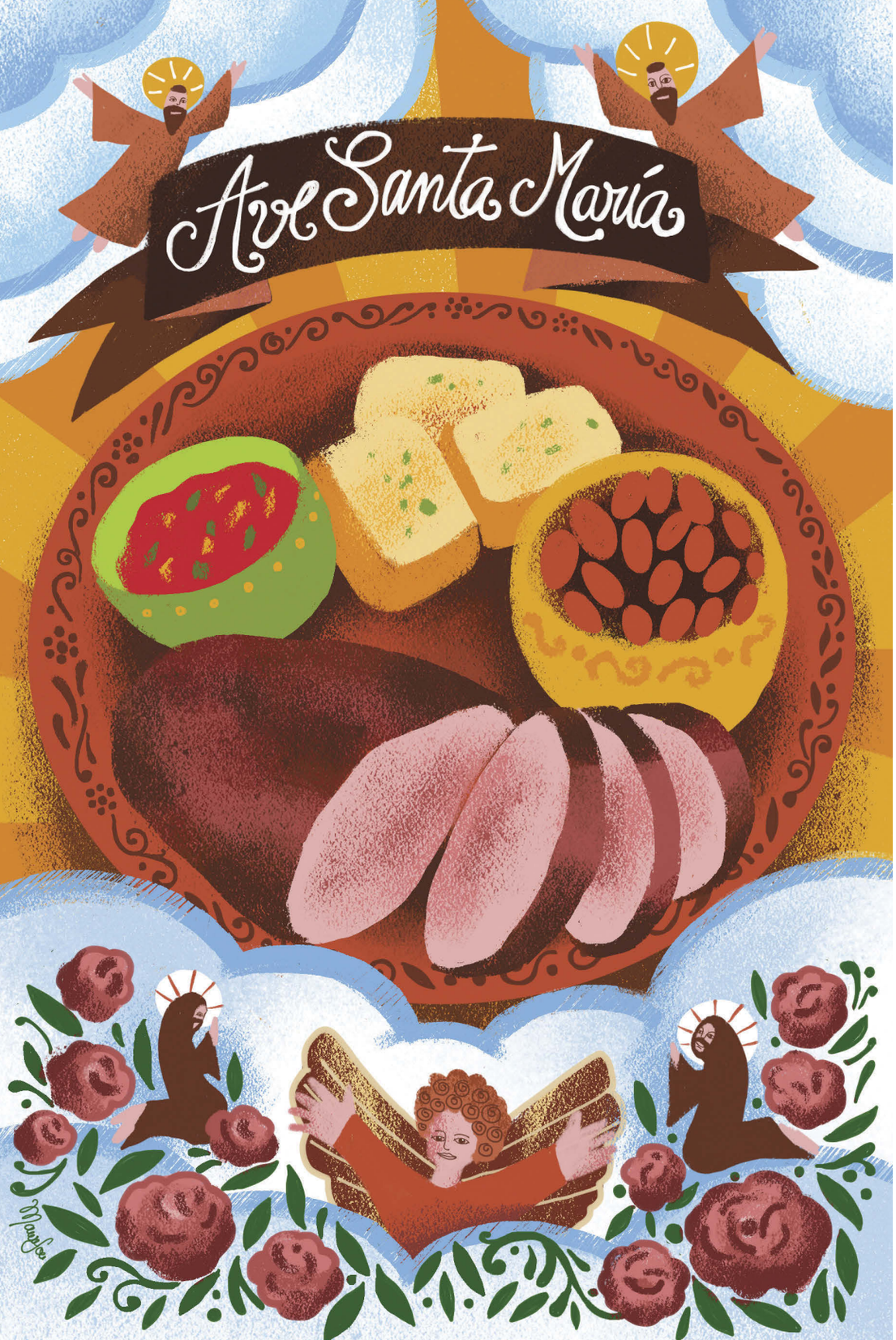
When our burgers turned crusty, Sherry tucked them in squishy buns swabbed with mustard. To scrape the grill before the next batch, she reached for another tool. It looked like the sort of thing she would buy at a restaurant supply store. But my friend, who works in real estate redevelopment and knows 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 forge traditions.

John T. Edge is the founding director of SFA and the host of TrueSouth *on the SEC Network/ESPN.*

Tell SFA about the vernacular architecture and design innovations that have enriched your world. Tag us on Twitter and Instagram @southfoodways.

Amy C. Evans



Illustrations by María Loor

SMOKE AND MIRRORS

The myth of Santa Maria

BY GUSTAVO ARELLANO

THE COMFORTING, MELLOW SCENT OF BURNING RED OAK COALS HIT my friend and me as soon as we parked in Santa Barbara, a wealthy town on California's Central Coast, and the gateway to the region's celebrated wine country. Here was a barbecue tradition more mythologized than Zeus: Santa Maria style.

We settled into our table at a popular downtown restaurant and asked about their specialty. A waitress promptly regaled us with a version of the description posted on the website of the Santa Maria Valley Chamber of Commerce:

> "It started in the mid-19th century when the rancheros gathered to help each other brand their calves each spring. As a thank-you to his fellow vaqueros (America's first cowboys), the host would prepare a Spanish-style barbecue, consisting of beef barbecued over a red-oak fire, served with pinquito beans, bread, salsa, and homemade desserts."

The meal was fabulous: wagyu tri-tip, minimally dressed, sprinkled with salt and pepper. Red oak imbued the beef with a sweet smokiness that never overwhelmed. There was no garlic bread, which usually accompanies Santa Maria–style barbecue, nor the customary mild red salsa used to lend a dash of tang. But the tri-tip, coupled with the pinquito beans (a sweet, pink legume with the creaminess of pinto) made it easy to forgive those oversights.

The tables around us began to fill. It was springtime, and COVID restrictions were slowly lifting across California after a winter of death. People were so raring to go out again that I couldn't even make it up to Santa Maria, the namesake city for the barbecue. Most of the

As my friend and I walked around downtown Santa Barbara, our conversation turned to the obvious: We had just eaten a lie.

barbecue-specific restaurants there and in surrounding communities were booked or wouldn't open until the weekend.

So we settled for Santa Barbara, a shorter drive from Los Angeles anyway. As my friend and I walked around downtown after lunch, our conversation turned to the obvious: We had just eaten a lie.

We had participated in a fantasy promoted as a gastronomic trip to the past. It was a past that never really existed, a lie first told long before the exploitation and bloodshed began that led to our meal.

THE CULT OF BARBECUE has always bothered me. It's a celebration of erasures upon erasures spun as an all-American celebration of heritage. Come to think of it, that's par for the USA course.

It starts with the name: barbecue. Although humans have grilled and smoked meats as long as we've known how to cook with fire, the word itself is of relatively recent coinage. The Oxford English Dictionary dates it back to the 1660s, an Anglicization of the Spanish barbacoa, itself a loan from the Taino people of the Caribbean. From the earliest days of the conquest, chroniclers described how intrigued they were by the Taino practice of cooking meats over wooden slats as opposed to directly on flames.

Spaniards adopted the style even as they slaughtered the Taino and other indigenous people of the Americas. Barbecue was born from genocide.

The Spaniards brought over the animals that serve as the foundation for most American barbecue today—beef, pork, lamb, and goat. Indigenous people across the Americas incorporated the animals into their barbacoa traditions. The English picked up these traditions in turn, then African-Americans made it into their own, from the slavery days to freedom. That's a story of oppression and resilience being rightfully told more and more across the South, a model of truth telling worthy of patronage.

That's not the story of Santa Maria–style barbecue.

Its origins lay with the Spaniards who conquered California during the late 1700s. Franciscan fathers established missions that spanned nearly the entire state. They invited Indigenous converts to move onto their new land holdings, then placed them into what amounted to indentured servitude. In Santa Barbara and the Santa Maria Valley, those Indigenous people were the Chumash. Game meat cooked over fire was a part of their diet, but they relied more on seafood and foraged plants.

Barbecue as gluttony was anathema to them. That form of barbecue became the food of Spanish California.

The conquistadors and their descendants built cattle empires that transitioned into Mexican hands after Mexico declared independence from Spain in 1810. Those ranches survived well into the 1850s, until drought and conquest by the United States ended most of them. American settlers turned grazing lands into farms. Those new inhabitants created what historian Carey McWilliams deemed the "Spanish Fantasy Heritage."

This fantasy imagined Spanish and Mexican California as an idyllic wonderland of señoritas and rancheros, engaged in an endless fiesta even as they discriminated against the Mexicans who remained. They took on those trappings and styles of the Mission days. Downtown Santa Barbara, for instance, has adopted building codes that encourage structures with clay-tiled roofs, whitewashed walls, and arched windows and walkways. The idea is that visitors and residents alike can imagine themselves as part of a romanticized history.

As California tribes and scholars push back on the narrative, this historical amnesia is starting to fall out of favor. Today, the only things the public continues to embrace of the Spanish Fantasy Heritage are the architecture and Santa Maria barbecue.

Santa Maria barbecue gained national fame in the 1970s, as the region's wines earned acclaim and the press swept in and happened to notice the region's food. Major publications have covered restaurants across the Central Coast that offer this style of barbecue ever since. The Hitching Post II in Buellton made a cameo in the cult-classic 2004 movie *Sideways*.

Correspondents bought the story that local boosters sold them. That story was built on the erasure of the most important Santa Maria—not the river or the valley, but the city of about 100,000 that serves as the center of the region's barbecue scene. Here, the smoke of red oak helps boosters shield tourists from seeing what the city really is: working class and 76 percent Latino. Many Indigenous workers from Mexico and Central America toil in the fields. Every time people eat the succulent tri-tip and the savory pinquito beans, their plight goes missing. So does their food.

Santa Maria's real barbacoa scene is growing—try the savory beef barbacoa tacos at 805 Tacos, the Mexico City–style lamb barbacoa prepared by Taqueria Lindo Mexico #2, or the goat barbacoa from the Casa Oaxaca food truck. The latter is just a mile away from an Elks Lodge world-famous for its tri-tip.

May the Santa Maria Valley Chamber of Commerce celebrate the modern-day barbacoa of its region as much as it celebrates the barbecue of its imagined past.

Gustavo Arellano is Gravy*'s columnist, and a columnist for the* Los Angeles Times.

A CURMUDGEON LOOKS AT BARBECUE

You could say I'm not delighted with everything that's going on in the world of barbecue these days.

BY JOHN SHELTON REED

WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT THAT there would someday be celebrity barbecue cooks with their own television shows, best-selling cookbooks, product lines, and James Beard Awards? Or that, in hundreds of barbecue competitions every year, thousands of participants would vie for millions of dollars in prize money? Or that new-style barbecue restaurants would be opening in cities across the country, some with white tablecloths and wine lists? These days the internet seethes with a blooming, buzzing proliferation of barbecue blogs, newsletters, and webcasts (AmazingRibs.com has 32 million page views and 12 million visitors a year). There are barbecue programs on the Food Network, TLC, Destination America, PBS, Netflix, and who knows where else. *Texas Monthly* and *Southern Living* now have barbecue editors.

You could say that barbecue is hot these days. (Sorry.)

Perhaps that's a good thing, on balance, but a hidebound traditionalist like me can still find much to view with suspicion. Every silver lining has a cloud.

One cloud that comes with no silver lining at all is the steady disappearance of old-time vernacular restaurants and joints, places that cook the traditional barbecue of their locale (chopped whole hog in eastern North Carolina or ribs in Alabama, for instance) and not much else. The situation may be especially dire in the Carolinas, which once had hundreds of these places, many dating from the Golden Age of the 1950s or even before. Often they were institutions in their communities, places for the after-church crowd, the Rotary Club, and teenagers on dates. Most have closed now, hammered by competition from fast-food chains, and perhaps by the realization that there are easier ways to make a living. Some were closed by their founders, others didn't

Illustrations by Molly Brooks

make the transition to a second generation, and third-generation places are truly rare.

Maybe even more distressing than closures, however, are conversions to the smoke-free Dark Side. Again, the situation may be most disturbing in the Carolinas, where it's a sad fact that a large majority of sometime and would-be "barbecue" places now rely entirely on electricity, or what Hank Hill calls "energy-efficient clean-burning propane" to produce mere slow-roasted pork with barbecue seasoning, what the Campaign for Real Barbecue calls "faux 'cue."

Another trend to deprecate is the relentless grinding down of distinctive local styles. Thirty years ago I wrote that barbecue is the closest thing we have in this country to Europe's wines and cheeses: drive a hundred miles, I said, and the barbecue changes. You could tell where you were by what barbecue you were served. But that has become a far less reliable indicator. For instance, one can't help but notice the recent intrusion of Texas barbecue into places where it doesn't belong—like North Carolina. I should say that if we Tar Heels have to succumb to an invader we could do a lot worse than Texas, but I liked it better when their barbecue was a clearly labeled exotic, not simply "barbecue." In truth, I'd be happy if I had to go to Texas to get it.

Even worse than possible Texas hegemony, though, is the metastasis of what I call the International House of Barbecue (IHOB)—restaurants, many of them branches of chains, that offer a mix-and-match assortment of meats and sauces, a mishmash of regional styles. This is fine for traditionless places like Seattle, or Asheville—or for Kansas City, where this hodgepodge *is* the tradition—but it should be outlawed in Raleigh, Memphis, and Austin. IHOB is also partly responsible for the spread of the Kansas City heresy that barbecue is about doctored-ketchup sauce, an insidious doctrine now making inroads in the Carolinas and even Texas. But it must share the blame for that with "competition barbecue."

The rise of that sport, as some of its practitioners call it, is one of the most remarkable developments since the turn of the century, and competitions should get credit for introducing barbecue to many Americans, especially outside the South. Also to their credit, most competitions require competitors to cook with wood (although pellets of pressurized sawdust count). The cloud here is that, like IHOB restaurants, barbecue competitions contribute to the leveling of regional differences that should be cherished. More than half of the thousand or so competitions each year are "sanctioned" by the Kansas City Barbeque Society, which requires competitors to cook pork shoulders, pork ribs, beef brisket, and chicken—never mind that they may be cooking in North Carolina, where until recently chicken, brisket, and ribs could be barbecued, sure, but didn't thereby become *barbecue*. And although the Society claims that all sauces are treated equally, somehow Kansas City–style sauces always win, and I'm pretty sure the Texas no-sauce tradition is a complete non-starter.

While I'm at it, a minor complaint is that competitions give undue weight to barbecue's appearance. Although, to my mind, *any* weight is undue weight, you may disagree; but surely when someone can write online about choosing exactly the right sprigs of parsley to line the Styrofoam box presented to the judges, things have gotten out of hand. Yes, good looks get points—14% or so of the score in KCBS competitions, more in others—but as my buddy Vince Staten once said, my taste is mostly in my mouth.

More importantly, television coverage of competition barbecue has contributed to some unfortunate misconceptions. It doesn't greatly matter that some of the big winners come on like trash-talking pro wrestlers, but it does matter that (like pro wrestlers) nearly all competition celebrities are white. That compounds a larger pattern of erasing barbecue's roots in the Black community. As Adrian Miller, the editor of this issue, pointed out in a 2018 op-ed for *The Kansas City Star*, only one of the Barbecue Hall of Fame's first twenty-seven inductees was African American, and he died in 1940. The Hall has taken steps to correct this situation, including putting Adrian on the nominating committee, but there is still work to be done.

Another recent development that might evoke a raised eyebrow is the efflorescence of aspirational barbecue restaurants where cooks are addressed, without irony, as "chef" and liquor sales may be a profit center as important as the barbecue itself. These places usually serve some form of what I call *haute* barbecue and others have called "elevated" barbecue. I think that label disrespects old-time barbecue, which, done right, requires just as much labor and skill, but whatever it's called, this new stuff comes in various forms. Some of these places honor local traditions by trying to perfect them, a few are trying to create local traditions in places without them, many float free from any recognizable tradition—and the resulting barbecue can be good, *very* good, even worth the price. And, bless them, these places cook at least mostly with wood and they're not in direct competition with the vernacular places I love, so I'm happy to see them flourish.

But I must point out that they are undermining a democratic tradition that goes back to community barbecues in the eighteenth century and was largely continued by the old-time places. Until recently, most catered to all sorts and conditions of customers—lawyers, construction workers, teachers, plumbers, doctors, policemen, country plow-boys and urban cowboys, hippies and rednecks, Protestants,

Catholics, and Jews, even (after 1970 or so) Black and white—but almost always with a strong blue-collar representation. That won't be happening at places with $15 pulled-pork sandwiches and valet parking.

But (I hear you say) why don't I stop whining? If I can't celebrate the good things that are happening, why don't I at least suggest some ways to resist the not-so-good ones? Well, pardner, I've done what I can. A few years back Dan Levine and I started the aforementioned Campaign for Real Barbecue (TrueCue.org), to honor and promote old-time restaurants that cook with wood and to encourage new ones. (I'm happy to say that we're now operating in five Southeastern states and the District of Columbia. God bless Texas, which doesn't need us.) And because I've come to believe that the preservation of traditional regional styles may be up to educated home cooks, I've written a cookbook which is intended to be a sort of primer on those styles and a guide to cooking them.

Anyway, I believe that there is some value in merely bearing witness to what is being lost. Call it whining if you want. In the world of barbecue, as in the world at large, the forces of change are mighty and they may be irresistible. But as the great Victorian jurist James Fitzjames Stephen once observed, although the flood may be up, and it may sweep away all in its path, there is no reason to sing hallelujah to the river gods.

John Shelton Reed's contributions to barbecultural studies include Holy Smoke: The Big Book of North Carolina Barbecue; Barbecue: A Savor the South Cookbook; *and* On Barbecue, *just published by the University of Tennessee Press. He lives in Chatham County, North Carolina.*

"THE BEAUTY OF BARBECUE IS THAT YOU JUST DON'T KNOW"

An interview with chef Michelle Wallace of Gatlin's BBQ in Houston, Texas

AS TOLD TO ADRIAN MILLER

Photo by Point and Click Photography

THE WORLD OF BARBECUE IS OFTEN DEPICTED AS AN ALL-BOYS' CLUB. BUT Black women have long made their mark as entrepreneurs and the head cooks at family gatherings. Michelle Wallace occupies an even more unusual position. She's the executive chef of Gatlin's BBQ, a traditional, Black-run barbecue restaurant in Houston, Texas. Wallace shared some of her journey with *Gravy*.

Where did you grow up?
Specifically, I lived in Baden, on the north side of St. Louis. This was an area that was previously German.

Is there such a thing as St. Louis barbecue?
It is a good mixture of things. The sauce is kind of sweet. Some places sauce the meat and then finish it on the grill. Our [St. Louis style] barbecue is very pork heavy. My dad barbecued all the time. He was big on barbecuing pork steaks, rib tips, and chicken. We're also big on snoots [pig snouts].

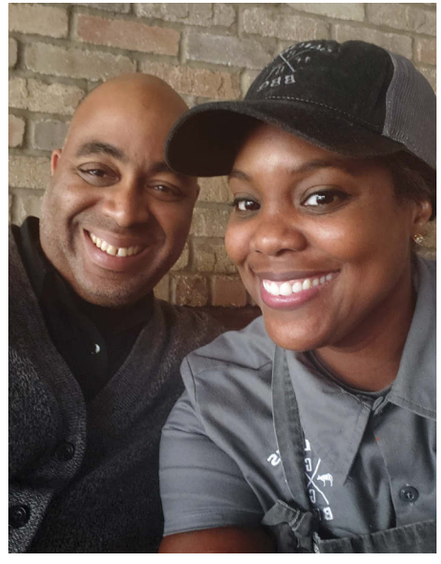
What's the traditional way to prepare snoots?
My dad would parboil them by doing a quick blanch. He finished on the grill so that they would have a chewy and crispy texture—think chicharrones on the outside and gelatinous goodness on the inside.

Tell us more about your dad.
My dad was a police officer. He knew all of the great barbecue spots in St. Louis. I remember that he would bring home this hot link sandwich smashed together with potato salad, pickle, onion, and a sweet barbecue sauce. C&K was the place that made those sandwiches. My earliest barbecue memories are cooking with my dad. My dad cooked with high heat, not the "low and slow" method. When making pork steaks, my Dad would tug a piece off for me to sample. People called him "Wild Man Wallace." He's the kind of guy who would offer people beer and food, even if he didn't know them well.

What got you interested in barbecue?
Watching my father grill first piqued my interest. But also, I would mimic in my kitchen what I saw on television and ate at restaurants. Seeing people enjoying a bite of my food is my high. I started regularly cooking for others in 2008 because of Jamar Israel (Fletcher), a cousin of mine who played in the NFL. He loved seafood, so I would grill trout or salmon with a bunch of vegetables. The word spread to other NFL players, and soon, they would pay me to make meals for them.

What's your first memory of barbecuing for yourself?
I remember in my second year at Texas Southern University, I had a tiny Weber grill, and I wanted to cook for my friends. We were broke students, and we just wanted something other than the cafeteria food. I called my dad. I remember asking him about how to properly stack the charcoal and get the fire ready. If I remember correctly, the meal was successful.

Tell us about your culinary education.
After graduating from Texas Southern with a degree in health administration, I eventually enrolled in the culinary program at the Culinary Arts Institute of Houston. As part of my culinary school study abroad program, I studied in China for three weeks, primarily Beijing, Xi'an, and Shanghai. I have a closet full of Asian condiments. Fish sauce is one of my favorite ingredients to work with. My first line cook position was with Chef Mark Holley at Pesce in Houston. I finally got my chance to work the grill station when the grill cook called in sick.



Adrian Miller (left) and Michelle Wallace

Selfie by Michelle Wallace

How did you come to work at Gatlin's?
I randomly met Greg Gatlin at a party. I was there because my twin sister worked with the wife of Greg's lawyer. When I saw Greg, I said, "Hey, there's that barbecue dude." We got to talking, and I told him about my dreams of doing a food truck concept focused on sandwiches. He loved the idea and said that we should work together. This was June or July of 2016, and the rest is history.

How can we show women more love in the field of barbecue?
We have to get away from the idea of having a man's approval for what a woman can do. Greg trusts that I'll make something that people will love to eat, as well as managing the pits. Most women are the wives of the barbecue guy, and they don't cook. I'm one of the few women who does create barbecue on my own terms.

What's a typical day like for you?
I usually get to the restaurant by 4 A.M. to 4:30 A.M. I check the wood in the first pit, which is loaded with briskets and pork butts. Next, I put wood in the second pit, which is eventually loaded with baby backs, spare ribs, turkey, and chicken. From there, managing the fire and being mindful of time is the main objective for the day. There are many variables in barbecue, and the beauty of barbecue is you just don't know...and I love it. It's in the adjusting that I find the excitement.

What is your favorite barbecue side dish?
Potato chips (either plain or salt and vinegar), or mac 'n' cheese.

What is your favorite barbecue dessert?
Rice pudding.

Favorite barbecue beverage?
Cold beer, especially a lager. Now, a margarita goes with everything!

What's the difference between a barbecue and a cookout?
Barbecue is the product itself. A cookout is the experience, the people there, the music playing, and the food being served.

Any parting thoughts?
I respect the art and the technique of barbecue so much. I respect the old tradition of cooking barbecue. Those things are embedded in us. We have a different understanding of the history of cuisine. Some people outside of our [Black] culture lack the understanding of where certain things come from and the techniques used. Things that can only be taught by, and learned from, someone who knows the tradition...our elders. If it was given to us correctly, it's in us. We *are* those things. They [white chefs] *do* those things. White chefs can learn the culture. But they are not of it. But all can enjoy it!

Alex Bazemore in Chesapeake, VA, April 2021

Photos by Joshua Fitzwater and Matt Wade

HERE'S LOOKING AT 'CUE

Two Virginia pitmasters carry on a legacy

BY DEBRA FREEMAN

TURN ON THE TELEVISION OR TAKE a look at food media. Folks would have you believe there's barbecue in every Southern state except for Virginia. The birthplace of eight American presidents just happens to be the birthplace of American barbecue, and it's time everyone knew that Black pitmasters from Virginia got to the pits first.

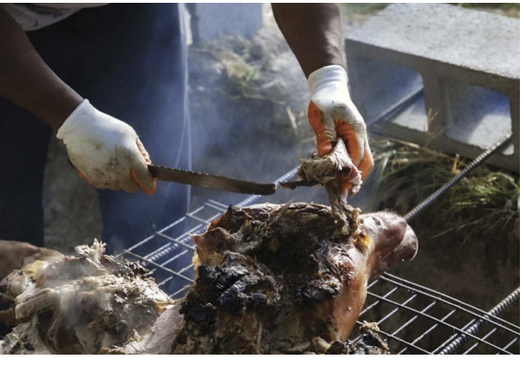
American barbecue is a mix of contributions from Native Americans, European settlers, Africans, and early African Americans. Captain John Smith wrote that the Powhatan Indians at Jamestown would construct apparatuses that were sticks raised above the ground on posts with forked tops. Eventually, this approach began to evolve, with enslaved African Americans at the helm of the cooking process. According to Michael W. Twitty, author of *The Cooking Gene*, "working over pits in the ground covered in green wood—much as in West Africa or Jamaica...it was enslaved men and their descendants, not the Bubbas of today's Barbecue Pitmasters," who perfected the technique.

As early as the seventeenth century, barbecued meats were fairly common at Virginia gatherings. Although hogs were typically the protein of choice, squirrel, venison, and oxen were prepared as well. By the mid-eighteenth century, the word "barbecue" was synonymous with a gathering that included meats cooked over coals. In 1799, the Irish writer Issac Weld wrote about his travels to Virginia, and specifically remarked about barbecues in the state, "The people in this part of the country, bordering the James River, are extremely fond of an entertainment which they call a barbacue (sic). It consists in a large party meeting together, either under some trees, or in a house, to partake of a sturgeon or pig roasted in the open air, on a sort of hurdle, over a slow fire."

By the early 1800s barbecue was so entrenched in Virginia history that Americans thought of the state as barbecue's "original habitat," as noted in the *Weekly Messenger* in 1825. In 1841, the *Southern Literary Messenger* referenced "that Virginian Saturnalia—a Barbecue." James Hammond Trumbull, a nineteenth century scholar, wrote in 1872 that barbecue was so connected to the state that it should be considered a "Virginian word."

Enslaved pitmasters dug pits, chopped wood for coals, tended the fire all night long, butchered the hogs, made mopping sauces for basting, and cooked and flipped the hogs. Enslaved and free Black Virginia pitmasters like Thomas Griffin,

RIGHT: Alex Bazemore and Sam Clayton flip a whole hog; BELOW: The hog, before and after



Juba Garth and his wife, Mandy, John Gilmore, John Dabney, Jasper Crouch and thousands of other men and women toiled in the trenches.

Griffin was a free man of color who owned two popular restaurants in the 1850s, The American Saloon No. 84 and Tom Griffin's Restaurant, both in Richmond. His specialties were barbecue and Brunswick Stew. After his death, a reporter for the *Daily Dispatch* wrote about the greatness of his barbecue.

After Dabney purchased freedom for his wife in 1856, he began making payments for his own freedom, but before he finished the installments, slavery had ended, and he chose to pay the balance to his owner. After the Civil War, he became a caterer and restauranteur in Richmond where he was in charge of many large barbecues. Dabney eventually owned several restaurants, including the Senate House Restaurant, which was described by the *Richmond Whig* newspaper as a "first-class restaurant." He was also known for being a talented mixologist.

Today, Black pitmasters like Sam Clayton and Alex Bazemore are working to keep those traditions alive. Both men honed their skills by cooking whole hogs in barbecue competitions, and Bazemore runs a catering business in Suffolk, where his barbecue turkey and pork are highly regarded. For the past two years, Clayton and Bazemore have recreated the steps taken more than 400 years earlier to prepare a traditional Virginian whole hog. They leverage the past to showcase the role of Black Virginians in America's barbecue story, then and now.

Debra Freeman writes about the intersection of race, culture, and food. She has written for Plate Magazine, Pit Magazine, Gravy, Epicurious, Southern Grit Magazine, Garden and Gun, *and* Gastro Obscura.

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: A barbecue pork sandwich at Johnson's Southern Style BBQ in Harrisburg; A barbecue pork sandwich at Dixie Bar-B-Que in Jonesboro; A barbecue pork sandwich at Shemwell's Bar-B-Que in Cairo.

BIG TRADITION IN LITTLE EGYPT

Sliced barbecue pork sandwiches in southern Illinois

BY TITUS RUSCITTI

FOR DECADES, THE LATE MIKE Mills was the face of southern Illinois barbecue. His 17th Street Barbecue restaurant put the town of Murphysboro on the map. A Memphis in May champion, he was an ambassador for the region and its people. But his backyard is rarely mentioned as a barbecue bastion. This is a mistake, for pitmasters here serve a distinctive dish, worthy of notice and study: the sliced barbecue pork sandwich.

Southern Illinois might as well be the South. "Little Egypt," the area bounded by the Ohio, Mississippi, and Missouri rivers, has been a cultural isolate since before the Civil War. A tour of some of the area's older spots, combined with a dive into the region's barbecue history, gives us a peek into a part of the country that has never been eager for change. Order a barbecue sandwich here and you'll probably be served tender smoked pork that's smoothly sliced like sandwich meat. A few of the longer established places in the area serve that pork with an orange sauce often mixed with vinegar, tomato juice, and other ingredients that are closely kept secrets. While neither a sliced pork sandwich nor orange sauce is unique, the combination of the two is compelling. And the best place to taste that combination is here in Little Egypt. Travel this part of Illinois and you recognize that even in this moment, when chain barbecue is on the rise, odd cultural cul de sacs persevere.

Photos by Leah Sutton / leahsuttonphotography.com

At Dixie Barbecue in Jonesboro, Jennifer and Richard York have been smoking boneless hams on Wednesdays since 1966. Jennifer's family bought the restaurant that year, and the recipes came with it. Boneless hams arrive midweek from their longtime supplier. Richard and his crew smoke them over hickory wood in the restaurant's original pit. The next day, they slice the meat a quarter-inch thick. Before serving, the sliced pork is lightly reheated on a hot flattop to crisp the edges.

Pulley's in Marion, founded in 1923, served a similar sandwiched until it closed in 2007. A local landmark, it was the spot for barbecue, pie, and socializing. Local lore goes it had one of the country's first drive-through windows, which was really just a door in the back where customers could drive up to place their to-go orders. Some say the drive-through was born during Prohibition, to cater to local bootleggers.

The town of Cairo (pronounced Kay-row), forty miles south of Jonesboro, sits where the Mississippi and Ohio rivers converge. The area boomed in the 1800s thanks to river trade and the Illinois Central Railroad. It declined over the twentieth century for economic and social reasons, including a troubled history of race relations and multiple instances of racial terror against the area's Black residents.

Luther Cash Shemwell opened his place here in the 1940s. He was a well-known pitmaster in the area and ran a few spots over the years before turning a former laundry into Shemwell's Barbecue. The crew here slices with an electric carver and toasts the white bread sandwiches on a sandwich press. The sauce is neon orange in color and vinegar-forward in flavor, with the consistency of mayonnaise.

The small town of Harrisburg is a straight twenty-five-mile shot west of Marion. Rupert Johnson, a fourth-generation African American pitmaster, stands tall in the pits at Johnson's Southern Style Bar-B-Q. His family left the Deep South and brought their barbecue traditions here with them. Born and raised in the region, Rupert opened Johnson's Southern Style Bar-B-Q in Harrisburg in 1984. Though he plans to pass the business to his granddaughter soon, he can often be found in the back, hand slicing the meat, smoked from hams sourced from a nearby farm. He insists that the practice of hand-slicing smoked meat is "a dying technique" that was once more prevalent across the country. One can still find sliced pork sandwiches in pockets farther south, like Birmingham and eastern Tennessee. (Ridgewood Barbecue in Bluff City, Tennessee, is one well-known example.) Johnson says that resting, then slicing the meat takes longer than pulling or chopping, but results in a juicier sandwich.

Over the last generation, coal mining and other drivers of the local economy have declined. Facing down economic changes, the people of southern Illinois now look to culture for continuities. In Little Egypt, sliced barbecue, smothered in an orange-colored sauce, is one of those continuities. For locals who have stuck around, and for intrepid barbecue pilgrims, these sandwiches are a totem of home and region.

Titus Ruscitti is a Chicago-based writer whose work has appeared in Thrillist *and* Serious Eats.

My Mother, Meat Alternatives, and Me

Their caregiving roles reversed, a mother and daughter try to find common ground around one of their favorite foods.

by LATRIA GRAHAM

Illustrations by LINDSEY BAILEY

THERE ARE OTHER RATIONAL ANIMALS ON THIS planet—other creatures capable of using tools and feeling something like emotions. In my mind, two major things separate us from the rest of the animal kingdom: fire and stories. Barbecue is the best of what can happen when you merge the two. No other animal has harnessed the capabilities of fire the way that we have, using an open flame to add layers of flavor to our food. Fire is elemental to our existence. Its light helps us beat back the darkness. The stories we tell while we cook and eat sustain us when physical nourishment is not enough. Those tales—about how our world came to be, about where we come from, across the water, tethered me to the South when I decided to roam from it.

My daddy gave me a reverence for barbecue. He was a man of the land. As a fourth generation Graham he farmed it, and in exchange it fed him. He turned that relationship into a business, and for much of my adolescence, our family ran Graham's Produce, our farm stand. When the land offered him too many fruits and vegetables, or they went bad too fast, he would feed them to the hogs we kept in a pen at my grandmother's place, next to what used to be my grandfather's tool house. We never had too many hogs—somewhere between four and six, but no more than ten. When it was cold enough, the men from our little corner of Silverstreet, South Carolina, came together for a hog-killing. When they processed the hogs, everybody came away from the undertaking with bundles of meat, neatly wrapped in white butcher paper. Stored in the deep freezer, those cuts would see our relatives through the winter.

Even though I spent most of my youth running the produce stand and slopping hogs, I was a girl, so I didn't get to cook barbecue. The gender roles are so entrenched in Silverstreet that women still wear stockings to church, even in the sweltering July heat. Every time I go back, folks ask why I'm not married, or at the very least why I don't have babies. The oral and tactile history of how my family made barbecue eluded me. When I got older and started traveling on my own, I rode the highways looking for smokers and huts, telltale signs that these duck-ins held something delicious inside. As my elders got up in age, my daddy started taking the animals to a butcher. Whole hog barbecues became less frequent.

As the years ticked by, those roadside places started to disappear. Sometimes the smokehouses burned down, or the property owners raised the rent. The old men I knew who used to cook hogs on the side are dead or dying. My father died in 2013. Last year I had to sell his farm. The way of life I remembered was no longer sustainable. The South that I grew up with was slowly fading out. More and more, the barbecue spots that I find in my travels are slick steel and glass endeavors with PR teams. These restaurants buy their meat by the piece instead of cooking whole hogs. I am thirty-four and a relic of a bygone time.

This awareness—of traditions fading and the food world changing—is how I found myself on a road trip with my mother. At sixty-one years of age, my mother abruptly decided that she was going to stop eating meat. Our destination was a vegan barbecue spot in Stone Mountain, Georgia. I knew when I turned off the interstate onto a tree-lined highway that my mama was going to have questions. "Girl, where in the world are you *taking* me?" The words slid out of my mother's mouth fast and hot. She sat up a little straighter in the passenger seat and, without waiting for me to answer, whipped her head from side to side, searching for the on-ramp in case she desired to get out of the car and walk back to the interstate.

You would think, after over ten years of taking her down backroads in search of good food, she would learn to trust me by now. I will admit there were previous road trip moments that made us both nervous. Back before GPS maps were precise, I took her searching for this spot called Grits and Groceries, near Belton, South Carolina. The food was good, but the place was *out-there* out-there, one step beyond what us country folks call "the sticks." I could tell that she thought we might be going somewhere like that again.

When we started this day trip, I told her we were going to Atlanta, but what I really meant was that we were going to be Atlanta-adjacent. A creative type, my

mother is rarely interested in the fine details. She knew we were going to go try some food, and that, at the beginning of our adventure, was good enough for her.

Our relationship has always been like this—playing off each other's preferences. I prefer consistency, and she relishes creativity. Home cooked meals from my mother were a treat; she might decide to cook over the holidays or make a special dish to celebrate our birthdays, but regular weekday dinners were not her thing. A postal worker by day and a fashion designer at night, she grazed on whatever snacks were in the vicinity to squeeze in a couple of hours of sewing before bed. As the eldest child and daughter, the domestic task of feeding our family of four fell to me. Eventually I went to boarding school, trying to escape my family and the boredom of 2000s rural life, but on weekends and holidays I resumed the day-to-day grind of cooking at home. I tried to make it interesting, graduating from things like spaghetti casserole and chicken with hand-formed dumplings to dishes like carne asada served on homemade corn cakes. I wasn't a recipe developer yet—just a floundering teen, and later, twenty-something graduate student, trying to figure out how to run the family produce stand and forge my own identity.

In 2012 I moved back to South Carolina to care for my father, who was in the throes of late-stage cancer, and we fell

back into the routine established when I was an adolescent. When he died, I realized my mom was in decline, too. So I stayed in my hometown and continued to care for her. On the uncomfortable days, when the medicine wasn't working, or she was frustrated about her physical abilities, the one thing I knew how to do was make sure that she had something she liked to eat. So, I did. Her comfort foods—chicken bog, or homemade pappardelle with mushroom ragù—regularly appeared on the menu. Few things make her smile like a bowl of potato soup. I've spent the last three decades as her personal chef, figuring out what she will and won't eat.

Between her surgeries, I would take research assignments all over the South. I would return home with a cooler full of barbecue, the fat from the meat coating the paper bag it was wrapped in. I brought back smoked chicken slathered in white sauce from SAW's BBQ in Homewood, Alabama; oakwood smoked ribs from Pig Floyd's Urban Barbakoa in Orlando, Florida; and slow-smoked chopped pork sandwiches from Sam Jones BBQ near Greenville, North Carolina. We never had leftovers.

Good barbecue was one of the precious few things we could agree on, the one type of takeout I could bring home and receive no complaints. "You know what I like," my mother would say—and I did. Here are the rules I've managed to suss out over the years: If it looked like a place that knew what they were doing—smokers running, brisk service, a line of devoted diners, I should get the chicken. It probably wouldn't be dry. If there was a stack of wood outside but no smoke actively coming from the building, the place was iffy. The wood might be for show, or the pitmasters stopped cooking early. In that case, better to try the ribs, which can hold up to the abuse. If no smokers could be found, or they were sold out of everything else, she would take a pork sandwich. God help me if I brought her brisket—she couldn't stand the stuff, even though, when properly done, that piece of meat is probably my favorite.

If I was working in the Lowcountry, I knew better than to come back from Charleston without a plate from Rodney Scott's. Once I picked up our usual order—the three-meat combo platter (pork, brisket, and ribs) for me and whole-hog sandwich platter with collard greens and potato salad for mom, but left the restaurant without a bowl of his banana pudding. I made myself do a U-turn. Hours later, when I got home, I put the dessert on the table and told mom of my exploits, joking that if I came home without it, she might just make me do the 200-mile trip back to Charleston. Caring about what she ate and serving her things she liked was the closest I could get to telling my mother that I loved her. So I made sure she had her banana pudding. Her discerning palate allowed me to form my own strongly opinionated and unapologetic proclivities about what I considered to be good barbecue—something that women in our family didn't often get to have.

But something was wrong with my mother now, and the doctors couldn't quite figure out what it was. She didn't get out much anymore. Too young and vibrant to put into a long-term care facility, I watched her decline and spend more time in her recliner. By early 2021, she was willing to try anything to improve her health. She decided to try giving up meat. To my mother, changing her diet felt like a bid to save her life. I missed the witty, creative woman I grew up with. After a decade of functioning as her main caregiver, I supported her decision as an olive branch to try to save our relationship. So, when I heard about Grass VBQ Joint, a vegan spot in Stone Mountain, Georgia, that cold-smoked their offerings, I suggested this little road trip. Maybe, just maybe, our barbecue adventure could change the way we engaged with each other. It was a lot of pressure to put on some plant-based meat, but amid a global pandemic it felt like there were few options we could explore together.

Maybe, just maybe, our barbecue adventure could change the way we engaged with each other. It was a lot of pressure to put on some plant-based meat.

My mother's hard pivot to vegetarianism presented something of a quandary

for me. Since our family shrank, I had to learn how to cook for two. Now, I could either make vegetarian food for both of us, or prepare separate versions of every meal. Overburdened with work, loathing dishwashing, and struggling with originality a year into a pandemic, it appeared that I would be mostly vegetarian, too. I never thought that I would put the words "vegan" and "barbecue" side-by-side in a sentence. I realized that this shift in the way we ate was probably permanent, and I would no longer come home with a cooler full of barbecue as an expression of love. The prospect of letting my appreciation of the barbecue tradition languish filled me with grief. Barbecue is part of my family history, an integral component in my core memories, and part of my Blackness. I couldn't change my definition of it so easily.

IN 2019, 23 PERCENT OF AMERICANS report eating less meat than they had previously. Many cited health as the main reason. Others gave animal welfare or environmental concerns as their rationale. As a writer deeply rooted in the tenets of social justice, I realize I must care about environmental causes and economic agency, too. I live twenty-two miles from the North Carolina border, a state where hogs outnumber people thirty to one in some counties. Every time there is a hurricane, or even a really hard rain, we hold our breath, waiting to learn more about the fates of the manure lagoons from large-scale livestock operations that, when full, threaten the rivers and lakes where I recreate. Several years ago, in an effort to lower my ecological footprint and support regional economies, I started buying my meat from local farmers. I wondered every time I wandered into my local farmer's market if what I was doing was enough to shrink my environmental impact. Then, it felt, my mother forced my hand.

I bought a new round of cookbooks. Genevieve Taylor's *Charred: The Complete Guide to Vegetarian Grilling and BBQ* was global in a way that wasn't expecting. Some of the recipes hinged on things like herby bulgur wheat and Sri Lankan–spiced caramelized red onions. If I was going to cook vegetarian, I realized I wanted to do so in a way that was rooted in my regional culinary tradition.

I dove into chef Bryant Terry's offerings: *Vegan Soul Kitchen*, *Afro-Vegan*, and *Vegetable Kingdom*. I bought Jenné Claiborne's *Sweet Potato Soul* specifically for her barbecue-adjacent recipes: Creole red bean sausages, bourbon barbecue tempeh sandwiches, peach-date barbecue jackfruit sliders, and hickory baked beans. The recipes were not as time-consuming as traditional barbecue, but there was some ritual to them. These dishes felt closer to the things I recognized growing up.

Meat was a sign of prosperity for my father. His family knew the struggle of poverty, and they regularly ate cornbread and milk for breakfast. There were plenty of meals with no meat in his house growing up. That is the way my ancestors were raised. Meat was eaten when they killed an animal, and they used all of it. When I started to explore my family's agricultural history, I went back to eating some of those meatless dishes, putting my own spin on them. Still, I struggled with the idea of meat replacements.

What did I love so much about barbecue? Was it the bite of the blend of woodsmoke, salt, sugar, paprika and peppers that called to me? The slight crunch of the umami-packed bark on ribs that have been charred to perfection? Was it the texture of the meat, how it felt in my mouth? In my Greenville grocery, I found Louisville Vegan Jerky Co.'s Smoky Carolina BBQ. It had the tang I missed and the chew I was used to, but it didn't fill the hole. Some of these offerings contain a great deal of salt. How sustainable was this way of eating? I am still working through how much better these plant-based, soy-forward options are for the planet. A Texas-based company called All Y'alls Foods makes a black pepper and sea salt flavor soy jerky that tastes of smoke, but I still felt something was missing. It led me wonder if I should just satisfy myself with grilled vegetables and well-seasoned greens and let go of this notion of plant-based barbecue altogether.

WHICH BRINGS ME BACK BEHIND the steering wheel of my mama's late-model Mercedes. Because of the pandemic, my mother had not left our little section of upstate South Carolina in over a year. We held our breath—for a smooth drive and a long pause in the rain, trying not to break the tenuous peace we brokered before getting in the car. We passed the wisteria-covered corners of the intersections in Stone Mountain, only commenting on the weather and the scenery, knowing anything else might devolve into bickering.

After a couple of U-turns, I spotted the sign for Grass VBQ Joint: a pig in a chef's apron, with the words VEGAN AF tattooed on its arm. WE STAY SMOKIN SOMETHING read the tagline underneath. There was no visible smoker outside, no wood stacked against the building, but I wasn't sure that vegan-smoked, plant-based meat followed the old rules. I asked my mother what she wanted, showing her the menu on my phone.

"You know what I like," she told me before nestling down in her heated seat as the rain steadily thrummed on the windshield. I got her Da Clucker, a faux-chicken sandwich made with seitan, dressed in white sauce, with a side of smoked mac 'n' cheeze. I ordered a smoked brat sandwich made with Beyond Meat—a mixture of peas, beans, and brown rice—and a small dish of stout beer baked beans.

Twenty minutes later, I returned to the car with our order. My mother smiled and smacked her way through her plate. For a second, in the small space of this car, things felt normal. I did not have the heart to tell her my food was just ok, so I spared her my opinion.

In the months since that road trip, we've found an even better taste of plant-based barbecue closer to home, at a spot called Bobby's BBQ in Fountain Inn, South Carolina. Alongside the usual offerings of brisket, sausage, and smoked pork, owners Tay and Sarah Nelson serve jackfruit as a meat alternative. The jackfruit tree is native to Southeast Asia. Drought and pest-resistant, with no known significant damage to air, water, or soil, it seems to be a relatively sustainable plant. It also makes a darn good pulled-pork substitute. Lightly sauced to give it some flavor, once it is cooked, smoked jackfruit resembles tender meat. Its fibrous strands hold on to woodsmoke and sauce well. This is the layered complexity I felt was missing from my other forays into plant-based barbecue.

When we visit Bobby's, my mother and I stand on an island of our own making, in the middle of our desired diets. Some days I get the brisket barbecue platter. On others, I join my mother for a jackfruit sandwich. And if we are feeling adventurous, we share a plate of jackfruit tacos.

Latria Graham is a journalist. Her work has been featured in The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times, The Guardian, Southern Living, *and* Garden & Gun.

GRAVY
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ARE THEY PICKING AT US?

In eastern North Carolina, barbecue is the tie that binds.

by
S. Farhan Mustafa

Illustrations by Fahmida Azim

I DON'T REMEMBER

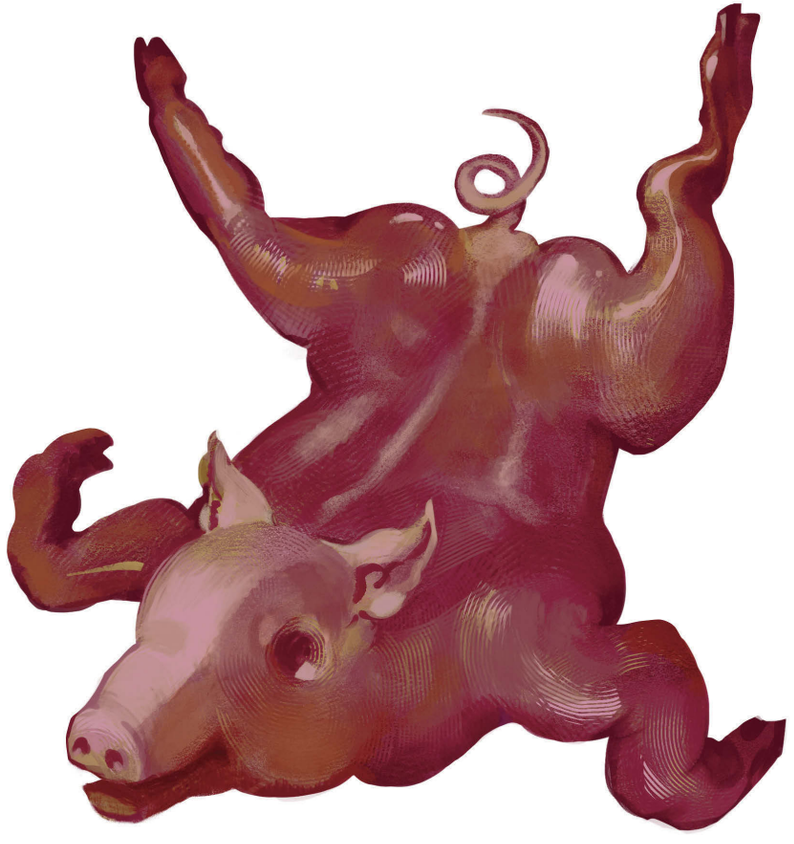
who made the cut to the goat's neck on that July day in 1988. I remember my dad, my uncle, and two friends holding Earl down on a blue tarp, firmly, gently, praying for forgiveness and gratitude and, through the Lord's words, trying to calm him. Earl bleated and pleaded. A swift single swish of the knife, and blood came pouring out. They held him tight and kept reading prayers while he gave his life.

Earl softly cried. Pappa cried. I wiped my tears and snot into my bare forearm. I looked down and saw the blood pool near his hooves, then around my sneakers. Earl let go quickly. I felt gutted. I moved toward the open end of the garage and sat down. As Early lay dying, his frantic hooves and our struggling feet had wrinkled the tarp, and crystal-red blood flowed in rivulets around the crinkly vinyl peaks. It seeped down, through the valleys, past my shoes, off the tarp, from the top right corner of the garage where he was sacrificed, beside the brick steps that led to the kitchen, down the driveway, spreading like capillaries in the rough concrete.

I was eight years old when we held our first *qurbani* at home. The word means sacrifice. In this case, *qurbani* refers to the sacrifice of an animal to feed the poor, part of Eid Al-Adha, a Muslim holiday that marks the end of the pilgrimage season in Mecca (*Hajj*). The day is also called *Bakra* Eid, translated as "Sheep's (or Goat's) Eid." A bit of a misnomer I think, as they're not running around enjoying the holiday as much as we're enjoying them. It's based on the story of when God asked Abraham to kill his son to prove his faith. Right when he was going to cut his son's neck off, his son turns into a sheep. Or a sheep appeared, and he decided not to sacrifice his son. I wasn't the sharpest kid in Muslim Sunday school. My stance for attending every mosque or church event was heavily influenced by the food offered. I joined a gospel choir once as much for the post-practice suppers as the music.

Our qurbani on that summer day in 1988 smelled like wet fur, dirt, hot iron, fear, and adrenaline followed by the aroma of grilled goat chops, kebabs, and goat pulao. After we sacrificed Earl, everyone felt guilty, grateful, and hungry. We cooked the chops low and slow over charcoal, like our families did back home in Lucknow, India, where my father is from.

The city is world-renowned for its many types of charcoal cooking—not just low & slow *over* charcoal, but dishes



where charcoal is briefly added inside the pot to infuse the dish with a smoky flavor, or where the pot is buried in a pit of coals and the pot lid is sealed shut with dough to make sure the steam doesn't escape. Even our goat pulao, a rice dish similar to pilaf or purloo, is smoked.

My family carried that low & slow creed from northern India to eastern North Carolina, where the smoky aromas might have been slightly different, but still of the same origin—charcoal. We lived on the edge of Greenville, a university town of 45,000 people at the time. Just a few miles to our south was the small town of Ayden, home to the famous Skylight Inn and Bum's Restaurant. We lived roughly the same distance from B's Barbecue, Parker's Barbecue, and the smoker of Brother Amin, a founding member of Greenville's Muslim community. He hauled his oil drum contraption to our mosque's picnics, where he barbecued chicken that rivalled B's. I hoped somehow that the smoke rising from his grill met ours and exchanged secrets with the smoke from our neighbors. Barbecue culture was king in eastern North Carolina and it, like the smoke, permeated every family's past and present. No matter what cultural misunderstandings arose, we could agree on smoked meat. As part of a growing immigrant community, though, I often wondered: Would I be welcomed as much as our aromas were?

BETWEEN 1980 AND 1990, GREEN-ville's share of immigrants grew by 50 percent. To see more—still a lot less, but, more—varied faces against a sea of white in a big town was a treat. Back then, with the exception of our mosque, the only other times I'd seen a majority of brown people in one place were during summer trips to visit our extended family in India. By 1989, Greenville's Muslim community included thirty families from around the world, though mostly South Asians and local Black Muslims.

My father was a pharmacology professor in Greenville, home of the Pirates of East Carolina University. The town of world-famous B's Barbecue. The town that prided itself on tobacco, pork, soybeans, and corn. The town where a man took hostages at the local Applebee's and they made a *Rescue 911* episode out of it. The town that sent a team to the Little League World Series. And, eventually, the town where then-President Donald Trump led a 2019 rally where the crowd started chanting "send her back," targeting Ilhan Omar, a Muslim Congressional Representative.

That full-throated chant evolved from my childhood, from microaggressions to now-unbridled aggression. Like the teacher who called me "For-eign" as a play on "Farhan" in sixth grade. Back then, I'd say I was born here, but no one cared about the details. My Little League coach explained to me in the spring of 1993 that I couldn't play on the All-Star team, due to "some sensitivities" that arose after the World Trade center bombing earlier that year. My coach was profusely apologetic about it; he told me that I was smart enough to understand how the world works, and that I'd probably be a doctor someday. Financially, the joke is still on me.

Racism and xenophobia can hide under the very thin veneer of polite societal norms, like that shiny, sugary layer on a fruit tart that looks super-fake at the supermarket bakery table. I felt grateful for the refuge the community potluck table at our mosque offered. Ours was the only table in town where you could find grilled seekh kebabs, barbecue chicken, KFC hot wings, Palestinian chicken with vermicelli rice, potato salad, okra sabzi, Southern fried okra, Lahori-style fried fish, cornmeal-fried trout, fruit chaat, and, yes, even that fruit tart. Black, brown, and white families from America, India, Pakistan, Palestine, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Jordan, Egypt, and Syria would all sit on the floor at the mosque, eating and laughing together. On holidays like Eid, we'd hold barbecues or fish fries at Jaycee Park in Greenville and sit outside on blankets and bedsheets, crowding together over steaming plates. Our meals felt like a protective cloak. No matter what the outside world told me I could or couldn't do because of what I was, with my plate full, I felt capable, supported, and limitless.

BROTHER AMIN, A BLACK MUSLIM community leader with local roots, knew pretty much everyone in the Greenville food chain. For this qurbani, he found us a farmer with excellent goats. The July morning we left for the goat farm, it was hot and muggy, with thick grey clouds, stragglers from the previous night's thunderstorm. My two brothers and I sat in our AMC station wagon, wondering why we were heading to a farm and when our dad would turn the air conditioning on. Eid was still a few days away. We figured we were scoping an outdoor space for our community's prayers. We rolled up to a farm a few miles north of town, where Brother Amin's blue 1950s Chevy Styleline was already parked by the pasture gate. He enthusiastically embraced us and took us to a large field dotted with two sheds.

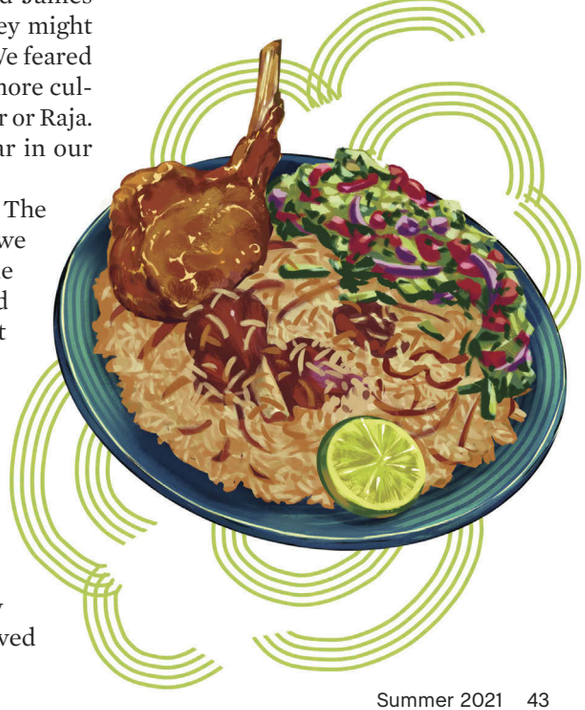
Our dad said we were there to look for goats. Before I could process what that meant, about a dozen goats came rushing out of a shed to greet us. They were as tall as our waists and nipped at our fingers. It reminded me of our summer visits to Lucknow, where we'd pet and feed our neighbors' goats. I remembered that I'd reach out and carefully rub my hand across the tops of their backs. Their spotted fur felt like used prayer rugs, smooth in one direction and rough in the other. I'd pat them firmly and feel their haunches, like I'd seen my friends do with their Labradors.

My dad said we could pick two goats to take home. For religious and cultural reasons, no Muslim families we knew kept dogs as pets. Since we weren't allowed to have dogs, we took what we could get. My brothers and I argued over potential goat names on the way home. Every animal has a name in the South, even if it's just "That Yard Cat." We gravitated to strong Southern male names, like Earl or Carl. Or any player on the Los Angeles Lakers, our favorite basketball team. We petted Earl and James Worthy and discussed how they might sleep in our shared bedroom. We feared our parents would insist on a more cultural name, something like Kabir or Raja. We kept Kareem Abdul-Jabbar in our back pocket just in case.

Our house sat on a corner lot. The driveway was big enough that we could practice our second-grade dashes from home plate to second base, or play cricket or half-court basketball. On this day, we parked on the street instead. The driveway sat empty and vast, almost foreboding. My little brother and I each grabbed a rope and gently lifted Earl and James Worthy from the trunk. We trotted them toward the house. Nihal Uncle was already there. Two goatless men arrived with a tarp and a black bag filled with knives and rope. My dad hauled out a weathered oak stump that they'd later use as a butcher block. We took the goats into the backyard to show them our swing set. Meanwhile the uncles set up the tarp and knives in our garage. They called us over and did a short prayer. I'd like to say "then it hit us." But it didn't.

PIG PICKINGS ARE A RITUAL IN eastern North Carolina. They are dinner, homecoming, culinary theater, and picnic rolled into one. They're aptly named because people just reach into a whole pig, slowly barbecued over coals, and pick out the meat they want. Here, people throw pig pickings for any occasion. Our neighbors hosted them. My Little League team did, too, and so did a church choir that I left after they tried not-so-subtly to convert me to Catholicism.

The town's pork obsession fed my parents' Muslim dietary paranoia. They



assumed that pork products and derivatives could be hidden anywhere—bread, cookies, chips, water, iced tea, air. We didn't think our neighbors were out to get us; we just assumed that, given the chance, they'd liquefy a pig and drink it like Kool-Aid. "Pork is to Americans what mangoes are to Desis," my dad would say, using the colloquial term for people from South Asia. And I got that. One of the adults at the mosque once told me that the brown spots on white people's skin came from eating so much pork and pigskin. Years later I found out those spots were just called moles, and that the adult was a dermatologist.

At the pig pickings I've been to, most people show up when the pig is about an hour from being ready, when it's flipped from skin side up to meat side up. But every barbecue event starts with a slaughter, whether it's done in a field, a barn, a processing plant—or a suburban driveway. Between the late 1980s and 1990s, North Carolina's hog production quadrupled. In 1992, the Smithfield plant opened in Tar Heel, some two hours south of Greenville. It became the world's largest processor of hogs by the late 1990s. We heard countless stories of hog waste lagoons seeping into groundwater, damaging the delicate systems of both the environment and the human body. We read about poor conditions for factory workers and a system enabled by pro-pork industry policies and slack enforcement of regulations. I knew that all pigs' lives didn't end with a prayer.

In Sunday school classes at the mosque, we learned that for *halal* meat (comparable to Kosher), the end matters as much as the life. At the age of twelve, I got to know pigs in a different way. I would take trips to the local slaughterhouses with my dad's coworkers to pick up coolers of pig and cow hearts. They were performing experiments to study coronary artery diseases. I'd slip on plastic gloves and marvel at how truly powerful these muscles felt in my hand. I felt some residual guilt. I remembered how scared Earl was. And I, too, justified the means to the end.

I WAS RELIGIOUS ENOUGH TO CON-vince myself that I wasn't solely responsible for Earl's death. Still, the regret hung over me like a Charlie Brown cloud. That cloud dissipated as we said final prayers and pulled out sheets of brown paper, knives, and ziplock bags. Familiar, quickened, and precise butchery followed. Nani, my maternal grandmother and family boss who lived with us, sat on the garage steps, telling Nihal Uncle how to thwack the meat against the tree stump to tenderize it first before slicing it.

Culturally, South Asians and Southern conservatives aligned on segregating sexes at social events. While the men killed and cut, the women divided and cooked. My mom and Parveen Auntie poured water with ice while we grappled with humanity and sinew. Later, they poured chai for everyone and then packed most of the meat into the garage freezer. After supper, we would divide the rest amongst the families that came over and to less-fortunate local families.

My brother and I started washing the blood down the driveway with the hose. My uncle suggested we pool it all in the tarp; otherwise, our porous driveway would turn pink. Mrs. Baverstock, our loveliest neighbor, inquired nicely about what we were doing. She was sincere and unfazed. We trusted her. One white family we didn't know slowly drove by, looked over, stopped, rolled down the window, and asked, "Hey, what are y'all up to?" I didn't know how to respond.

One of the hardest parts of growing up a person of color in the South is the burden of navigating intent. Was that

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question meant to express judgment, aggression, or just genuine curiosity? Maybe I was overly sensitive about how I differed from my neighbors. Since preschool, people in Greenville had pointed out my differences in skin color, religion, culture. Or maybe it was just me, feeling that I didn't belong and that questioning eyes trained on us even when they didn't. That's another way of saying that I never understood why we had to explain rinsing blood off our driveway. We all slaughtered, cooked, prayed, and gathered. In Greenville, though, like on George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, some people's activities seemed more equal than others. Eventually, I said, "Just cleaning up!" They smiled, waved, and moved on.

I felt immense pride in the details. Here we were, a bunch of kids, washing away a sea of red along with the fading whispers of Earl's life, washing away our guilt, in a zig-zag pattern as the pink water picked up a few rocks and pine needles and dirt, and a viscous brook swooshed towards the drain at the corner. Fur clumps rode the current. Dads daydreamed about goat nihari. Moms fried onions, cinnamon, cardamom, and cloves on an outdoor stove to make pulao. Coals burned for goat chops. The smoke and smells floated up to mix with the others. Like any summer weekend in Greenville, the aromas of neighborhood barbecues and family dinners soaked into our clothing and our hearts, then out through our pores, carrying stories of their origins. Up the street, my friend Will's dad probably had a pork shoulder on the smoker. Across the street, Rocky's mom was making her weekend gravy, rich with tomatoes and garlic. The warm front of fried onion, garlic, and ginger from our own home drifted to meet them somewhere over the driveway.

Dinner was ready. Platters overflowed with kebabs and pulao. Alongside stood a steel bowl of kachumber—sliced tomatoes, onions, green chiles, and cilantro with salt. I'd pour the juice that collected at the bottom of the bowl over everything, especially the Parker's corn sticks that Nihal Uncle never failed to bring. We ate with our hands, getting sticky and smoky. Us kids sat on the floor near our parents and drank Coke with ice, stealing sips of their chai. We discussed *Ghostbusters* and giggled about when our parents would stop referring to home plate as "home base." They talked about work and the upcoming presidential election. Ours were the voices of a growing community, filled with killings and pickings and religious entanglements, mixing like rising smoke.

S. Farhan Mustafa, a North Carolina native, builds analytics software when he is not writing about food. He is a former waiter, cook, investigative journalist, and startup founder.

Illustrations by Lindsey Bailey

KOSHER BARBECUE GETS A GOOD RIBBIN'

Jewish meat smoking traditions

BY MICHAEL TWITTY

AS AN AFRICAN AMERICAN JEWISH culinary historian of Southern heritage, one of the most frequent and sardonic questions I get is, "What about barbecue?" Assumed translation: *"Have you just given up on traditional Southern barbecue because it means pork, or have you come up with some clever substitute I've never thought of?"*

I know what they mean, and the assumptions pack in centuries of cultural distance and difference between Jews and their neighbors and notions of Black and white in America and the American South. However, I have an answer for everything, and out pops something they've probably never considered: One of the oldest barbecue-adjacent traditions was the preparation of the lamb at Passover. Jewish barbecue is older than brisket.

A closer look at Jewish dietary laws shows why barbecue is not oxymoronic. Jewish law, or *Halakhah*, is based on ancient rules handed down in the Torah and the Talmud. Those texts, along with the customs (*minhagim*) and folk traditions of the Jewish diaspora worldwide, inform how Jews navigate food and culinary traditions. Food is one of the powerful ways we both remind ourselves of our unique and distinct heritage and mold and mend our tradition to incorporate outside influences and affirm our participation as citizens of the places where we live. The Passover Seder—built on layers of history, migration, and cultural experience, with dishes absorbed, transformed, and shared across communities—exemplifies this.

Kosher meat is more than just properly slaughtered common domestic poultry and cloven-footed, quadruped ruminants. Kosher cuts are predominantly drawn from the forequarters of the animal. This tradition comes from the narrative of Jacob, also known as Israel,

in which he sustains a hip injury after wrestling with an angel. As a result, Jews who practice kashrut do not eat the meat that touches a quadruped's sciatic nerve. This nerve is notoriously difficult to remove, so unless you have an excellent butcher or live in Israel, most American Jews who practice kashrut tend to eat cuts from the head, the breast, brisket, deckel, rib, plate, and shoulder. Most importantly, each cut is soaked, salted, and soaked again to remove as much blood as possible before being sold.

In the South, kosher barbecue finds its highest expression in Memphis and Texas barbecue competitions, where brisket is king, especially when marinated or sauced with a tenderizing cola-based preparation. Kosher barbecued chicken, beef ribs, sausage, and lamb are also favorites. Ultimately, much of Southern kosher barbecue draws from a long association between immigrant Jewish populations and African Americans. Its expressions could be found most commonly in home entertaining, celebrating holidays like Sukkot (traditionally held outdoors), and synagogue dinners and fundraisers. That means you're more likely to find kosher barbecue at a competition, home, or community gathering than in a restaurant. Twelve Oaks Barbecue, a former kosher barbecue restaurant in Decatur, Georgia, has closed. As of this writing, it's unclear whether JoeBob's Kosher BBQ in Austin will reopen after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Kosher barbecue is thriving in New York City, however. Izzy's Brooklyn Smokehouse, with locations in Brooklyn and Manhattan, serves beef, chicken, and lamb dishes that incorporate Southern, Korean, and Tex-Mex flavors.

I like mixing and matching, too. In my kitchen, I make a brand of fusion I've called "Koshersoul," an "Afro-Ashekefardi" (West and Central African, Ashkenazi and Sephardic-Mizrahi) blend of Diasporas. Here, I offer Yiddishe Ribbenes, my version of Jewish barbecue. The basics include kosher powdered bullion, salt, and coarsely ground black pepper, followed by that southeastern European staple, paprika. A spike of cinnamon nods to central European and Lithuanian Jewish cuisine. I added a little ginger, which sometimes makes an appearance in German Jewish cuisine. Next, I added garlic, onion, oil, a splash of vinegar, a little bit of brown deli mustard and horseradish, and a bit of brown sugar. So basically, the kind of stuff that makes soups, roasts, briskets, pastrami, corned beef, and roast chicken taste so good, all rolled into one recipe.

You'll need short ribs, time, and patience.

Michael Twitty, a writer, culinary historian, and historical interpreter, is the author of The Cooking Gene: A Journey through African American Culinary History in the Old South.

Yiddishe Ribbenes

Serves 6 to 8

3 pounds beef short ribs, flanken style
1 tablespoon brown sugar
1 teaspoon powdered kosher beef or chicken bouillon
1 teaspoon kosher salt (I use Diamond Crystal)
1 teaspoon coarsely ground black pepper
1 teaspoon ground ginger
2 teaspoons paprika
½ teaspoon cinnamon
1 small onion, finely chopped
2 tablespoons finely chopped garlic
2 tablespoons olive, canola, or vegetable oil
2 tablespoons red wine vinegar
1 to 2 tablespoons prepared horseradish with beets (chrain), such as Gold's brand
1 to 2 tablespoons brown deli mustard

Rinse the meat and pat it dry. Place in a large, shallow bowl or dish, such as a baking dish. Combine the sugar, bouillon, salt, pepper, ginger, paprika, cinnamon, and cinnamon in a small bowl. Using your hands, coat the meat with the dry spices, rubbing it in. In a medium bowl, whisk together the onion, garlic, oil, vinegar, beet horseradish, and mustard. Pour the mixture over the meat, turning to coat. Cover the bowl or dish and refrigerate for 4 to 6 hours.

About 30 minutes before you plan to start grilling the ribs, remove the meat from the refrigerator and allow it to rest at room temperature. Prepare your grill, heating it to medium.

Grill short ribs over medium heat for 4 to 5 minutes per side. Remove meat from grill, wrap loosely in foil, and allow it to rest for 10 minutes before serving.

Be'teyavon—Bon appétit!

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

Photos by Lemia Bodden

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.

Redzepi'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.

Good food should invoke the safety, joy, and celebration of belonging. Instead, the food I experienced in Scandinavia made me feel wildly unseen.

I TOOK A WEEKEND trip through Europe and met with Agathe Legrand and Gabriel Ejzenbaum, 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

Could these restaurants uphold the stories of migration, flavor, and history built by American Black folk?

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.

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

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 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.

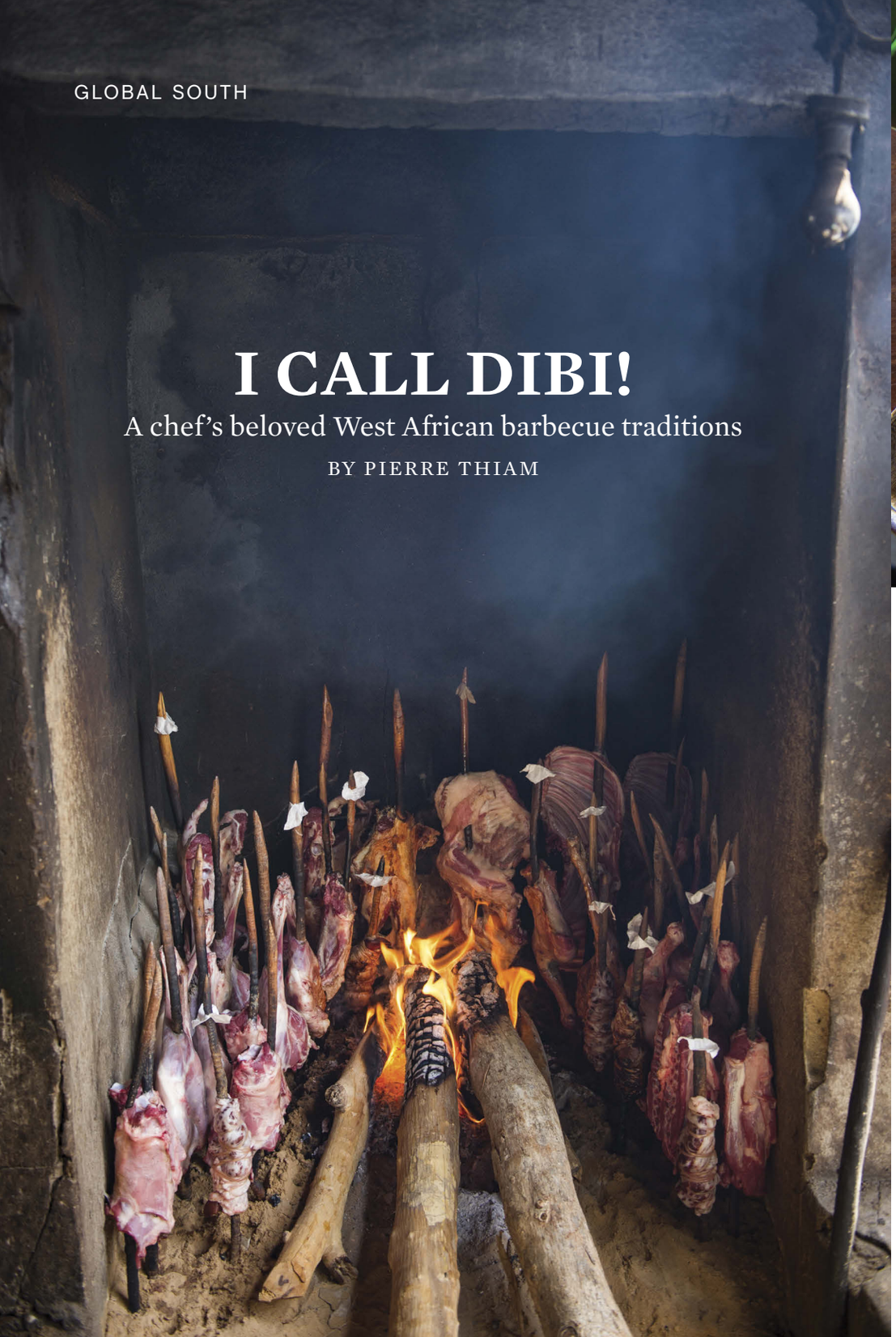
My time at both barbecue places reminded me of what theologian Henri Nouwen wrote in his book *Reaching Out*, "...[Hospitality] is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines." As an immigrant sometimes uncertain about where I belong, I felt as if 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.

Amanda Yee is a Black, Chinese, and Norwegian Californian who has recently moved to Berlin, Germany, from Copenhagen, Denmark. She is the creative director of 4 Color Imprint and writes about the intersection of food and social justice.

I CALL DIBI!

A chef's beloved West African barbecue traditions

BY PIERRE THIAM



LEFT TO RIGHT: Lamb roasting in the pit at dibiterie Bantyii in Dakar, May 2012; A spread of grilled meats at Seoul II in Dakar, June 2012

Photos by Evan Sung

THE CULTURES AND RITUALS OF BARBECUE LOOK DIFFERENT IN WEST Africa. In Wolof, the local language of my native country of Senegal, the concept called *teranga* translates as *hospitality*. That perfectly describes the soul of West African food culture. I named my restaurant Teranga because I wanted to create a hospitable space amidst the hustle and bustle of New York City. The spirit of *teranga* and the concept of gathering for barbecue are very closely related. When I was growing up in Senegal, most home cooks worked with a tool called the *fourneau*, a French word for a small charcoal burner. It consists of two pieces of metal, one on top of the other. The upper piece is a wok-like structure with an opening on the bottom covered by a metal grate that holds the burning charcoal and allows air to circulate. The lower piece connects the base to a cylindrical chimney that facilitates fanning the fire and collecting ashes. Place a pot or pan directly on the hot coals and a fourneau acts like a stove. Plop a metal rack on top and it becomes a grill. In Senegal, almost every household keeps a fourneau in their backyard and uses it daily.

Back home in Dakar, we burned wood charcoal when cooking on the fourneau to infuse meats with smoky fragrance and flavor. My mother would throw all types of meat on our fourneau to feed us kids, and any friends or relatives who happened to be at our house. She'd cook lamb, guinea hens, chicken, or whole thiof (white grouper). On the side, she would serve either plain white rice and a citrusy sauce, or fried plantains and a salad.

In Senegal, we celebrate a Muslim holiday called Eid Al-Adha (or *Tabaski*,

in Wolof), also referred to as "The Feast of the Lamb." Senegal is a 95 percent Muslim country, so on this day, every street in the country is filled with fragrant smells of lamb grilling on fourneau burners. Before cooking, choice cuts of meat are given to Christian families by their Muslim neighbors as an offering of peace. This gesture is reciprocated on Good Friday, when Christians offer a sweet porridge made of baobab fruit, peanut butter, and millet to their Muslim neighbors and friends.

In West Africa, barbecue is also considered street food. One of my favorite dishes—found on street corners all throughout Dakar and other great West African cities like Lagos, Nigeria, and Abidjan, Ivory Coast—is suya. Suya is prepared by rubbing thinly sliced pieces of meat (usually lamb or beef) with kankankan, arranging them on platters, and letting them marinate at room temperature to allow the meat to tenderize and soak in the spice mixture. The cook works a large grill rack placed over a burning charcoal brazier. To bring the meat to perfection, the sweaty cook deftly flips the marinated lamb with a long pair of tongs. Occasionally, he dips a paintbrush into a recycled tomato can of kankankan-infused vegetable oil and brushes the glaze over the flaming meat. The kitchen scene is almost identical in every suya joint in West Africa.

Vendors serve suya on skewers or directly on a plate, accompanied with thin slices of raw onions and more kankankan powder to serve as a dry dip. In Senegal, Suya can also be sandwiched in baguette bread, a heritage of our French colonial past. A small suya skewer generally costs around 50 West African CFA francs, or 10 U.S. cents.

Suya joints are usually dark and smoky shacks, with rustic long wooden benches

LEFT TO RIGHT: A suya vendor and his cart in Dakar, May 2012; A young woman cooks fish in a pot over a *fourneau* in the south of Senegal, November 2012.

surrounding wooden tables covered in vinyl. In older joints, the walls have darkened over time from the smoke of poorly ventilated kitchens. Few suya joints have menus. Offerings usually include grilled suya and either the local beer, La Gazelle, or fresh juices made of ginger or hibiscus.

One of my favorite suya places is Glover Court Suya in Lagos, Nigeria. A popular outdoor spot in a breezy, open-air space surrounded by eucalyptus trees, Glover Court Suya is a feast for the senses. There, dozens of suya vendors gather each day. Each vendor has a table and several large, charcoal-fueled grills. And as the workday comes to a close, hundreds of Lagosians of all walks of life line up at their favorite grills. Some are still in their office suits, others wear the latest fashions from local or international designers, and some women even don colorful wax-fabric headwraps to match their traditional dresses. Wafts of smoked charcoal and grilled meats fill the air. The mood is happy as patrons celebrate the end of another work day, talking and laughing while dipping their grilled meats in the dry kankankan dip.

In Dakar, I like to watch the solo vendors who sell suya from motorless rickshaw carts retrofitted with fourneaux. I think of meals past and plan my next suya, hot from the grill.

Suya is sometimes called "dibi Hausa" in Senegal. The word *dibi* refers to barbecue in Wolof, Senegal's native tongue. The Hausa people are the largest ethnic group in Sub-Saharan Africa, and the creators of suya. Mainly located in northern Nigeria, Hausas can be found in a great number of African countries, which explains why the dish is popular in so many different parts of West Africa.

But don't be confused: Suya (or dibi Hausa) is distinct from dibi, another style of West African barbecue. Dibi is also cooked on a grill or in a wood-burning oven, but the meat is not thinly sliced like suya and it is not marinated with kankankan. *Dibiterie* is the name given to the barbecue joints where dibi is served. Dibiteries are the places where people meet after going to the clubs, or just to hang out with friends. Unlike suya joints, dibiterie menus offer a wider variety of meats and cuts, including beef, chicken, sheep, or lamb. They might serve chunky pieces of beef ribs, chicken legs, or other bone-in meat, as well as offal—heart, gizzards, liver, or tripe. The latter are commonly called *lakhass*, which translates as "knots" in Wolof, because of the way the tripes are tied up, giving it the appearance of a tangled rope.

At a dibiterie, cooks usually work large earthen ovens, fueled with burning logs. Depending on the cut of meat, the cook places the meat closer or farther from the wood fire. A popular technique in dibiterie is when the meat is cooked *en papillote*: wrapped in kraft paper, seasoned with salt, lots of freshly crushed black pepper, garlic, mustard, and thyme, topped with thick onion slices. The meat cooks slowly in its envelope, in the back of the oven, where the heat is less intense. Still wrapped in the kraft paper which has puffed from the steam, the meat arrives at the table. Unwrapping the paper releases an aroma of seasoned cooked meat and onions—and a meltingly tender and flavorful dibi.

In dibiteries, one can even preorder a whole lamb, including the head, which is considered a delicacy. Cooking a whole lamb dibi is known as *mechoui*. It's a style we borrowed from our northern neighbors in Mauritania. Mauritania is also known for camel meat barbecue, served

A platter of seasoned suya at a vendor's stand in Dakar, May 2012.

The author enjoys a tray of dibi at Bantyii in Dakar, May 2012.

on special occasions, throughout northern Africa and the Middle East. Dibi is traditionally served with simple sides like French fries, fried plantain, or a lettuce and tomato salad. At dibiteries, food is ordered by weight in two sizes: *libar* (half a kilo) or kilo. To avoid the long wait, people place their orders early in the day, because the meat can take up to an hour to cook.

One of my favorite dibiteries is a place in Dakar called Bantyii. It is located downtown, just a few blocks from the popular Sandaga market. There is no name at the door, and the unassuming building where it is located seems to be crumbling. Inside Bantyii, the scene is surreal. The place is dark and smoky, with low tables and benches surrounding a dozen grills. Like Grover Place Suya in Lagos, Bantyii is run by a collection of independent vendors from different West African countries: Mali, Guinea, Niger, Nigeria and, of course, Senegal.

The decor of a dibiterie resembles that of a suya place, except that there are condiments on each table. Usually, it's a jar of Dijon mustard, a bottle of Arome Maggi aromatic seasoning, and hot pepper sauce. Dibiteries also offer utensils, but their use is optional. In Senegal, many believe that food tastes better when eaten by hand.

Though beef, lamb, and goat are most commonly used for dibi, pork dibi can also be found in the southern Senegalese region of Casamance, where there is a sizable Christian population. I once ate a gamey dibi prepared with antelope meat that the dibiterie owner had hunted.

Dibi is also synonymous with nightlife in Dakar. The atmosphere can get raucous when patrons begin discussing politics, soccer, or wrestling. In Senegal, wrestling is even more popular than soccer, and the wrestling champions are celebrities. Unlike Olympic-style wrestling, blows with the hand are allowed in Senegalese wrestling. Fights take place in stadiums packed with cheering fans.

In West African kitchens, the physical *act* of barbecuing—roasting or broiling food on a fourneau, oven over wood charcoal—is quite commonplace. And the *culture* of barbecuing—coming together around a meal prepared for multiple people to celebrate life—is also deeply ingrained.

AS A WEST AFRICAN chef living in America, it's an important part of my purpose to share the food and cooking techniques inherited from my ancestors. Beef suya is a popular snack at my New York restaurant. Here, at my home in El Cerrito Hills, California, I don't have a fourneau, but I do have a Weber grill, and I always use it to recreate the same smoky, slow-cooked flavors of dibi. Come summer, in the spirit of teranga, I often invite friends over for dibi in my Californian backyard. My secret for entertaining is to keep things simple. That's why I also use my grill to prepare the vegetable sides. I use vegetables from the local farmers' market. Asparagus, mushrooms, bell peppers, zucchinis and thick slices of red onions, tossed together with a little oil and then grilled until soft and charred, but still firm to the bite. I serve the grilled vegetables as a warm salad, dressed with a simple lemon-and-olive-oil vinaigrette and garnished with some fresh basil. The atmosphere at my backyard dibi party is always joyous and sometimes loud, just like my favorite dibiterie or suya joints in Lagos and Dakar.

Pierre Thiam is a chef, restaurateur, cookbook author, and social entrepreneur. He is the president and cofounder of Yolélé, an African food distribution company.

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LAST COURSE

Winner, Winner, Ribs for Dinner

MAY 6, 1978: BESSIE LOU CATHEY OF MEMPHIS SAUCES her ribs at the first annual Memphis in May International Barbecue Cooking Contest. Cathey won first prize—$500—among twenty-five contestants. In non-COVID times, the event, now known as the World Championship Barbecue Cooking Contest, draws more than 200 teams and awards more than $100,000 in prize money.

SFA GRAVY

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