



# THE ONE TRUE PITMASTER

**Ricky Parker,  
like his barbecue,  
contained multitudes.**

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28

SPRING 2016  
[southernfoodways.org](http://southernfoodways.org)



## A DYING BREED

RICKY COULDN'T SAY FOR SURE HOW MANY HOGS HE'D prepped since 1976, when he began tending the pits at Scott's Barbecue, the year Early Scott took the thirteen-year-old boy on as an apprentice and, eventually, son. It was immediately clear to Scott that no one could smoke hogs like Ricky. He was a pitmaster, body and soul, born to the rough trade. He would master pit, fire, and hog. Shovel, sauce, and spice. He would master barbecue. The young Ricky could remain on his feet for twenty hours straight: cleaning the pits, stoking the fire, shoveling coals, smoking hogs, serving customers. And the customers liked Ricky: courteous, handsome, a bit wild. Dedicated to finishing the job and doing it well, Ricky would eat standing up—"I eat on the run," he liked to say—and rarely if ever slept for more than three hours a night. Sleep didn't come easy when you were cooking with live flame. He'd close his eyes and experience terror-filled dreams of his pit catching fire, his hogs rendered inedible, the Henderson County Fire Department arriving too late to save his smokehouse, which now lay a conflagrated heap of charred timbers and sheet metal. Ricky would rather stay awake to watch the fire.

His eating and sleeping patterns, or lack thereof, remained constant through the summer of 2008, when I first watched Ricky Parker smoke a pig. At first sight of him—slender and gangly, his skin bronzed from working in close quarters to fire—I questioned how he could possibly find time even to dress himself, energy enough to shave that perfectly sculpted Van Dyke beard. Three hours of sleep and working like this? How can he be standing? How can he be alive?

But Ricky assured me that this was all

part of the whole-hog pitmaster's life. He repeated a boast that he recited to just about everyone who came to interview him: "I got to buy four or five pair of shoes a year. I do a lot of walking, a lot of pacing." He told me that he was married to his work more than he was to his wives, past and present. He spoke in self-mythologizing tones. He was special, an original, a dying breed. For all he knew, he was the last of the great pitmasters, a man who strove to smoke as many hogs as humanly possible.



Ricky counted sleep in hours and shoes in pairs, but, above all else, Ricky counted his life in hogs.

Annually, beginning with my first visit in 2008, I'd make a pilgrimage to eat Ricky Parker's barbecue. Each year, as I ate my chopped pork sandwich, he'd tell me about a future date circled on his mental calendar: July 4, 2013, the holiday weekend over which he aspired to cook one hundred whole hogs. One hundred! Hardly an arbitrary number crudely culled from a beer-fueled backroom bull session, but the apogee of human achievement. The age of modern Methuselahs. In sports, the most notable of statistical achievements. One zero zero. A symbol of perfection. One hundred pigs. One pitmaster's dream. Three digits' worth of whole hogs. A century of swine.

Ricky Parker knew with some certainty that no pitmaster, living or dead, had ever reached that number. Through a complex formula of weather data, gasoline

prices, hog futures, and unemployment rates, Parker calculated that 2013 would be his year. He could stop counting hogs after this achievement. He could slow down, ease into retirement, pass the pitmaster's shovel off to his son Zach. He might even learn to sleep.

But until then he would keep on cooking. Because no one could smoke hogs like Ricky. No one worked to make barbecue like this anymore. Few cared like Ricky Parker, the world's greatest pitmaster, the man who counted hogs to keep both himself and barbecue alive.

## THE BALLAD OF RICKY PARKER

THE WHOLE HOG IS THE PERFECT blend of barbecue: Every little bit of the animal can be consumed in a single, decadent, maybe even gluttonous bite. "You got a little bit of everything," Ricky Parker

liked to say. Ricky gave the world his all by providing everything the pig had to offer. This is what made the offerings of Scott's Barbecue distinctive: this everything, the very wholeness of whole-hog barbecue itself.

Ricky Parker's menu offered two sizes of wax-paper-wrapped sandwiches—regular and jumbo—alongside barbecue sold by weight (priced at \$7.50 per pound when I first visited) and stuffed into a paper tray decorated in red and white gingham. Ordinarily, the meat arrived cleaver-chopped to a medium coarseness. But whether delivered by bun or tray, the barbecue could be ordered crudely hacked, finely minced, or pulled, straight no chaser, from the hog.

Depending on one's tolerance for heat, the barbecue could be dressed with sweet, mild, medium, and hot homemade sauces, all made fresh by Ricky Parker. Most locals ate their sandwiches topped and dripping with coleslaw, which came in two varieties: the standard mayonnaise-heavy version, called white slaw, and a red variant made with ketchup and vinegar. Sandwiches could be further tricked out with fat rings of raw Vidalia onion.

Scott's sold a few varieties of potato chips and often stocked some fried pies made by a John Gordon from his house up the road, but there were no other sides except baked beans, which were burdened, in the best way possible, with heapings of barbecued pork.

Smoking whole hogs allowed Ricky to provide eaters with any edible portion of the pig; in addition to portion sizes and spice levels, customers, as if peering through the window of a butcher shop's display case, could select their individual cuts to get the taste and texture they wanted. At Scott's, one could eat a different barbecue sandwich every day of the week. The combinations and permutations were near limitless.

For example, a customer could request the wetter, fleshier meat from the inside of the shoulder, or the crusty exterior bark charred by flames. One could go even deeper, literally, into the very heart of the pig, to demand the meat from the undersides of the ribs, or the rib bones themselves; the jowly flesh nearest the neck, or the delicate tenderloin. Cuts could be mixed and matched—a pulled part from this, a chopped bit of that—to imagine the perfect sandwich.

Over a ten-minute stretch perched at Scott's lunch counter one summer afternoon I witnessed the full range of possible orders. Through the Plexiglas window that separates the meager prep area from the dining room, customers shouted rapid-fire lists of ingredients and techniques, combinations that ranged from the mundane to the extraordinary, the unusually healthy to the distressingly heart hazardous.

A quarter pound of plain barbecue, please.

Regular barbecue, white meat, extra chopped, no fat.

Jumbo, dark, pulled with a lotta fat on it, mayo slaw, extra hot. Occasionally, a customer would drop terms that reminded me of the so-called "secret menu" at In-N-Out Burger, a West Coast fast-food chain where a rabid fan base fetishizes an in-the-know language of keywords and food hacks. At Scott's, these orders sounded foreign, like they could not possibly come from a pig.

A medium middlin'. Or, even more bizarre: You got any catfish today?

Middlin' is what most people commonly refer to as bacon, the fatty underside of the hog, which earned its vernacular nickname for its location at the animal's midsection. The catfish is a rarer cut of swine, a six-by-three-inch strap of meat embedded under the tenderloin with the shape and fleshy shade of a catfish fillet

**He served five, ten, as many as two dozen hogs a day, every day but Sunday.**





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IF EVERY SPECTACLE includes and concludes with an explosive ending, the climax of Ricky's whole-hog cooking was the "flip," that final moment, after twelve or more hours of cooking, when with a heave and heft he flipped each hog so that the outer, or skin side, of the whole beast was rotated upward to earthward revealing what had long remained hidden: what was once a fleshy pink corpus transformed into a beautiful mess of slightly charred rib bones protruding from a ruddy-gold mass of roast meat.

Whether by hand-cranked spit or engine-spun rotisserie, the heat source for roast meats needs to be distributed evenly to ensure a well-cooked pig, side of beef, whole fish, or what have you. Think of the perfectly toasted marshmallow, its caramelized surface achieved by twisting it over the campfire; without motion, the marshmallow will burn unevenly, blacken, and might even combust.

But a whole hog is not a marshmallow.

Two-hundred-pound pigs are much too heavy, too bulky to reliably turn on a spit. Conceivably, a pitmaster could rotate a hog every hour or two, but the energy involved in hefting the carcass up and over, anywhere between four and twelve times in a cooking cycle, within arm's reach of fiery coals, as the meat becomes hotter to handle and increasingly grease slicked with rendered fat, would make the endeavor unbearable. Multiply that by twenty hogs all cooking at once, and even the most vigorous of pitmasters is faced with an impossible task.

For anyone who's turned even a spit full of chickens over a roaring fire, the work becomes quickly monotonous and tiresome. Before the modern-day mechanization of the rotisserie, turnspit dogs kept meats slowly rotating over the open fire. In the sixteenth to mid-eighteenth centuries, throughout Britain and its colonies, including America, households might have owned a *Canis vertigus*, Latin

## I traveled up to Lexington every year to sate my hunger for another plate of barbecue, but I also went to satisfy my curiosity about Ricky Parker.

for "dizzy dog," a specific breed raised to run in a wheel—like those favored by hamsters—which spun a chain connected to a fireplace spit. Also called kitchen dogs, cooking dogs, underdogs, and the *Vernepator cur*, or "the dog that turns the wheel," these short-legged, long-bodied Sisyphian pups also worked in early New England sculleries. The cruel treatment of the turnspit dogs eventually fell out of favor, and helped lead to the formation of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and the *Canis vertigus* became extinct.

Luckily, for the sake of mutt and man, pitmasters long ago figured out that whole hogs did not need constant turning if they remain belly, or meat side, down. Well-insulated pits, hardwood coals shoveled at timed intervals and deposited consciously around the carcass's perimeter, and vigilance against flame and flare-ups will keep a pig evenly heated, its meat uniformly browned. But eventually all hogs need to be rotated, flipped upward so that the meat can meet its maker and greet the world as barbecue.

Ricky Parker, naturally, had his flip technique systematically diagrammed, a series of steps from which the pitmaster and his pit hands would never deviate. First, he needed to determine that a hog had been cooked through to doneness. Tenderly squeezing its thick, round hams, like a doctor probing for foreign bodies, he could feel if the skin had separated from the flesh underneath. It felt, to me, like handling a slightly deflated basketball: applying a bit of pressure formed an indentation that would snap back into shape when released. He then

enveloped the hog's outer upturned skin with a single layer of tinfoil. A steel grate, the exact same lattice-type framework that held the pig on the pit, was placed atop the now foil-topped hog. Ricky then tightly fastened these two grates together with strands of wire, sandwiching the hog in between. With a great inhale and flexing of biceps, he hoisted this massive hog sandwich up and toward his chest, using the bars of the pit's grill to guide and glide the bottom-most grate, before pushing out and, releasing his weight to gravity's fortunes, upending the hog to land belly up.

One by one, day by day, across thirty-five years, Ricky Parker flipped hog after whole hog. I attempt to total the numbers but my head spins dizzily just thinking of Ricky: our *Vernepator pitmasterus*, the man who spun the wheel.

RICKY PARKER HAD MET the enemy and it was a stainless-steel box, the size and shape of a pool table, a closed-lid oven big enough to fit a whole hog, with four legs on wheels for added mobility, in case one needed to roll it closer to any 240-volt electrical outlet. A product of nearby Jackson, Tennessee, this contraption went by the generic name Hickory Creek Bar-B-Q Cooker—though there is no Hickory Creek anywhere on this side of the state. This was the very latest in smoking technology, a modern marvel that promised to take the work out of barbecue, and it was everything Ricky hated. Within a half-hour's drive of Lexington, I had met several pitmasters—though you could hardly still call them that—who switched from wood-fired pits







RICKY PARKER'S SONS ZACH AND MATT



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*Turn to page 4 to read more about Rien Fertel and Denny Culbert.*

