
MALLARD CREEK
ANNUAL BBQ
PEACE
LOVE
BBQ
N★C
THANK YOU FOR VISITING THE
MALLARD CREEK PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH BBQ

PULLED PORK POLITICS

Does the political barbecue have a role in today's South?

BY HANNA RASKIN

IT'S A HAPPY COINCIDENCE OF AMERICAN public life that people pick their political representatives and kill their hogs around the same time.

Across the South, any citizen willing to shake a candidate's hand is just about guaranteed a decent plate of barbecue come October. At least since 1769, when then-Fairfax County, Virginia, burgess George Washington said he "went in to Alexandria to a Barbecue and stayed all Night," elected officials have used smoked swine to shore up their political influence.

But as eating habits and voting patterns change, the longstanding relationship between barbecue and political power is fraying. Case in point: The legendary Mallard Creek Barbecue north of Charlotte, held annually for the last ninety-three years (with two Covid-related exceptions), is no longer inked on North Carolina candidates' calendars.

"Fifteen years ago, it was a required stop," says Sam Spencer, who's been a macher in the Mecklenburg County Democratic Party since 2004, when he plowed his college-freshman energy into Erskine Bowles' United States Senate campaign.

Even though that was only two decades ago, Spencer talks about his first Mallard Creek experience with the maudlin tone of someone recalling a sea captain who sailed away and never came back. He remembers the carnivalesque atmosphere of the event in those days, with hyped-up supporters hoisting enormous vertical placards above the massive crowd and backslapping candidates from both parties sandwich-boarding themselves between yard signs. But when he pulls up pictures to illustrate the ripsnorter he's describing, he lingers on the Dems who've passed away.

Shaking his head, he concludes, "I don't know if it's a must-attend event for politicians anymore."

At its beginning, the barbecue wasn't a political event. The men of Mallard Creek Presbyterian Church organized the barbecue in 1929 as a social gathering, with hopes of raising a little money to pay past-due bills on a new Sunday School building. They cooked a couple of pigs and a goat over a pit dug into the churchyard, grossing $89.50.

By the time church leaders finalized a menu for the yearly barbecue (pork, Brunswick stew, slaw, potato salad, and pie) and standardized its date (the fourth Thursday of October), Mallard Creek was considered a community happening. Consequently, candidates couldn't stay away.

Spencer points out it's unusual for white mainline Protestant churches like Mallard Creek to

Illustration by Iris Gottlieb

North Carolinians accept that a person who has strong opinions about barbecue and the courage to share them is morally fit to serve.

associate with politics. On the other hand, "If you work in Democratic politics, you're aware of Black churches," he says. "You can't run for public office in North Carolina without doing a church tour. But that doesn't happen in white denominations," which have traditionally been more concerned with avoiding offense than agitating for social change.

Still, he theorizes it's the barbecue that made the politics palatable. Even if Mallard Creek attendees weren't initially keen to quiz office seekers on their policy platforms, they didn't mind having the chance to size up the integrity behind the names on their ballots. North Carolinians accept that a person who has strong opinions about barbecue and the courage to share them is morally fit to serve.

"They have, what, 25,000 people who go through there?" says former Charlotte mayor Jennifer Roberts, who can be forgiven for overestimating the crowd by a few thousand. She used to greet them all, sometimes in the rain. "Even if they're just in line getting pickup, they see these candidates out there and they feel like, 'These are folks in my community. These are people just like me. They're here, eating barbecue.'"

Mallard Creek has all the folksy Americana elements that make feature writers swoon: If you're picturing the 193 buckets of Brunswick stew in grainy color as captured by a 1970s television crew chronicling regional quirks, you're not far off the mark. But there's nothing haphazard about how the event comes together. "Everything's got a committee," co-chair Charles Kimrey says. "We've got a subgroup for parking; a subgroup for trash; a subgroup for who puts flowers on the table."

They also have strict rules for the politicians who participate.

"We make a corral," Kimrey says.

Within the boundaries of the politicians' pen, candidates stand in a receiving line. Spots are first come, first served, so a Republican candidate for city council could end up alongside a Democrat running for a United States Senate seat. "You get people who aren't even running for office that year," co-chair Bill Wood says. "The commissioner of insurance would show up every year just to say, 'Remember me?'"

Less obscure candidates sometimes join the festivities, too.

"Way back, Dan Quayle showed up," Wood says while conducting a tour of the shipshape pithouse that's used just once a year.

Kimrey adds, "That was a mess, with knuckleheads standing on tables and stuff getting broke."

John D. Simmons/The Charlotte Observer; Diedra Laird/The Charlotte Observer

LEFT to RIGHT:
Scenes from the
Mallard Creek Barbecue,
1988–2008

Don Sturkey/The Charlotte Observer; Christopher A. Record/The Charlotte Observer

"George Bush was in town one time," Wood says. "We were freaking out he would decide to come. A helicopter in the ballfield makes a mess."

Nobody who comes to Mallard Creek for barbecue is required to interact with the candidates. There are two serving lines: One abuts the candidate corral and the other doesn't. According to Wood, the first line is always longer.

While that still held true in 2019, when the Mallard Creek Barbecue was last staged prior to its October 27, 2022 revival, the number of candidates and voters waiting to see them declined over the past decade to the high four figures—and that was before the pandemic upended people's attitudes toward close-up communication.

On the candidate front, that's in part because elections aren't as competitive as they were "before Mecklenburg became a blue fortress," as Spencer puts it.

Mostly, though, it's a reflection of the importance of early voting, which North Carolina adopted in 2001. In 2020, more than half of North Carolina's 7.4 million registered voters cast their ballots before Election Day. That means serious candidates at the end of October want to be at polling sites, not barbecue tents.

As for voters, they're still making the trek to Mallard Creek, even if they're not buying barbecue sandwiches the way they once did: Wood guesses they might have a gluten-based objection to bread. Hickory-smoked meat sales are also down, from a peak of 3,800 pounds to 1,000 pounds. But Brunswick stew fans drive from as far as Florida for Mallard Creek's version, made with converted rice instead of potatoes.

When they get to the barbecue grounds, though, they're not getting out of their cars. They swipe their credit cards and take their to-go boxes home, perhaps so they can eat stew while watching election previews on cable news.

"We've become a drive-thru society: Nowadays, we're Chick-fil-A," Wood says. "They pull in and then just keep moving on."

And as much as the organizers and politicians who cherish the tradition lament it, they might have to do the same. While Mallard Creek has no plans to discontinue the barbecue, everyone involved acknowledges there's no point to reigniting embers of the event's heyday. They'll savor the memories instead.

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