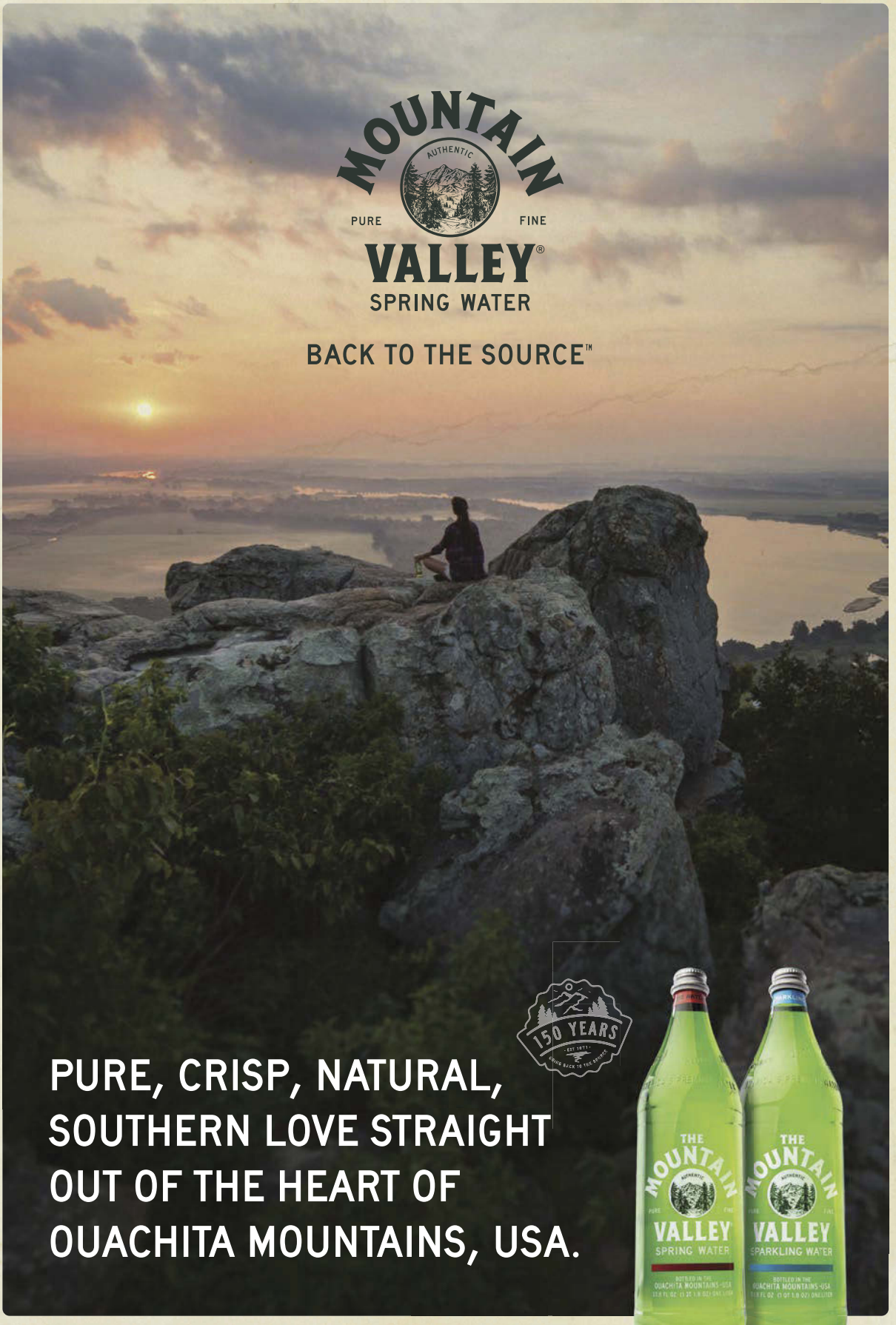
SFA GRAVY
NO. 86
WINTER
2023


MOUNTAIN
AUTHENTIC
PURE
FINE
VALLEY®
SPRING WATER
BACK TO THE SOURCE™
150 YEARS
PURE, CRISP, NATURAL,
SOUTHERN LOVE STRAIGHT
OUT OF THE HEART OF
OUACHITA MOUNTAINS, USA.
THE MOUNTAIN VALLEY SPRING WATER
THE MOUNTAIN VALLEY SPARKLING WATER
MOUNTAINVALLEYSPRING.COM

SFA GRAVY
ISSUE NO. 86 • WINTER 2023

Contents

Gravy is a publication of the Southern Foodways Alliance, whose mission is to document, study, and explore the diverse food cultures of the changing American South.

SARA CAMP MILAM
Editor in Chief
gravy@southernfoodways.org

ROSALIND BENTLEY
Deputy Editor

BITA HONARVAR Image Editor

RICHIE SWANN Designer

OLIVIA TERENZIO Assistant Editor

KATIE CARTER KING Copy Editor

MELISSA HALL AND MARY BETH LASSETER
SFA Executive Staff
info@southernfoodways.org

FEATURES

ON THE COVER AND ABOVE: Illustrations by Delphine Lee

IT WILL TAKE AS LONG AS IT TAKES

A lesson or two from Mr. Bull

BY SARA CAMP MILAM

ONE OF THE THINGS I'VE GRUDGINGLY come to admire about the children's cartoon *Peppa Pig* is that its characters make no pretense at being role models. Practically everyone on the show, children and adults alike, sucks a little bit. It's almost like *Seinfeld* in that way. As a parent, there's a subversive pleasure in watching a children's show that's all but devoid of morals, takeaways, or life lessons.

But, as with every rule, there's an exception: a *Peppa Pig* character with something to teach an overextended parent, if not a preschooler. Clad in a bright-yellow helmet and safety vest, construction worker Mr. Bull makes semi-regular cameos on *Peppa*. If he's not there to fix the perpetually leaky school roof, he's probably found an excuse—municipally mandated or otherwise—to dig up the road. "Digging up the road," in Mr. Bull's parlance, is his highest calling and his greatest pleasure. As far as I can tell, his boundless zeal derives from two habits of highly successful bulls.

First, Mr. Bull never rushes. In one episode, Peppa and her family are on their way to the playground when traffic stops. "We're digging up the road!" Mr. Bull bellows gleefully, before going on to explain to the family how he'll go about fixing a leaky underground water pipe. "How long will it take?" Mummy Pig asks. Mr. Bull's answer is practically Zen: "It will take as long as it takes!"

Second, he knows when to take a break. Mr. Bull usually works alongside two employees, Mr. Rhino and Mr. Labrador. As busy as they are, they never miss a tea break. Mr. Bull even keeps a folding table, chairs, and a china tea set at the construction site. He's a good boss in that way, setting an example for healthy work-life balance. That may explain why he's never had any turnover.

Mr. Bull relishes his work, and he seems to be in supreme command of his time. I admire both of those qualities, but (at best) I only share one of them. Too often, I feel like my time belongs to

Douglas Oliver (1961–2017) in the pit room at Sweatman's Barbecue in Holly Hill, SC, June 2012. Oliver worked the pits at Sweatman's for more than 35 years.

Denny Culbert

everyone *except* me. So I've been trying to think of how to take a page from Mr. Bull's playbook.

I think I may have cracked his secret: Mr. Bull doesn't multitask. When he's digging up the road, he's digging up the road. When he's building a house, he's building a house, one brick at a time. ("You can't build a house in a day!" he scoffs to Peppa. "It will be finished...tomorrow.") And when it's tea time, he's enjoying his tea.

Of course, most of us believe we don't have the luxury of Mr. Bull's monotasking. In the past month, I've toggled between print and podcast *Gravy* stories, online Christmas shopping, planning a child's birthday party, and keeping tabs on the drama of the British royal family—sometimes all in the same hour. And I wonder: If I focused on one thing at a time, would I get them all done? Would I enjoy the process more? Might I even have time left over for a cup of tea? Actually, I don't *like* tea. But a knitting break sounds nice.

Many of the stories in this issue circle around barbecue, a craft famous for taking as long as it takes. And maybe barbecue has some Mr. Bull–like lessons to offer. It alternately demands intense focus and hands-off patience. Between the carefully choreographed hog flips, there are times when you can, and likely should, shred the cabbage for the slaw (a fresh, addictive kimchi slaw, if you're Jiyeon Lee—turn to page 46 for her recipe), visit with customers, check your group chat (Farhan Mustafa has that story on page 30), or sip mezcal with new friends around the pit (as Gustavo Arellano did, page 24). That focus-and-relax rhythm goes a long way toward explaining barbecue's appeal, both as a business and a hobby.

And speaking of hobbies, thank you for reading. I recognize that this magazine, which is my work, is your leisure. And my wish for you is that you enjoy it, that you savor it, just as Mr. Bull does his tea. Leisure time is precious. Enjoy it, and then get back to digging up your road, whatever it may be.

Gustavo Arellano is a columnist with the *Los Angeles Times*, host of its daily news podcast, *The Times*, and author of *Taco USA: How Mexican Food Conquered America*. He has been a *Gravy* columnist for five years and still marvels that a Mexican kid from southern California has accomplished this. Arellano aims to cover a South that's yet to make it into mainstrem depictions of the region and to elevate a people who are changing the South as much as the South is changing them. He doesn't usually make New Year's resolutions, but 2023 is the year he hopes to return to the South more often.

Bridgette "Bee" Blanton is an illustrator and graphic designer based in the beautiful foothills of western North Carolina and the hands, head, and heart behind Tiny Pencil Studio. Since graduating from the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD), she's put her creativity to use for businesses, magazines, and more. Blanton is passionate about making things, embracing wild creativity, and putting pencil to paper (or iPad) to see what magic can happen. When she's not working, you'll find her planning her next home-organization project or looking for an excuse to build a charcuterie board. Her New Year's resolution is to dance more.

Iris Gottlieb is an illustrator, writer, shark-tooth collector, animator, and aspiring upholsterer. Her current activities include writing a book about trash, learning to make pop-up books, studying gossip's role in culture, painting barn quilt squares, and hiking. A resident of Durham, North Carolina, Gottlieb has illustrated for *The New York Times*, *Smithsonian* magazine, *NPR*, and TikTok. Her books include *Seeing Science*, *Seeing Gender*, *Everything is Temporary*, and *Trash Talk* (coming 2024). In 2023, she resolves to be confident in following her gut, take more risks to increase joy, and grow an unusual species of gourd.

TOP TO BOTTOM: Jai Williams; Courtesy Bee Blanton; Chani Bockwinkle

Delphine Lee is a Washington, DC–based illustrator. A frequent *Gravy* contributor, her work has been published in *The Guardian*, *The Washington Post*, *AARP*, and *Atlas Obscura*. When she's not working, she might be in the kitchen making a fifth, sixth, or tenth cup of tea for the day, or hanging in a hammock outside with a book. Lee is a big mushroom lover, and it's her life's quest to find morels in the wild. If she does, don't ask where—she won't be telling anyone. Her New Year's resolutions are to make time to create art for herself, read two books per month, finish knitting a sweater she started two years ago, and take it easy without making impossible lists for herself.

Ryan Shepard is an Atlanta-based writer whose work focuses on food and the intersectionality of race, gender, and class. She recently earned an MFA in narrative nonfiction from the University of Georgia and also holds an MA in strategic public relations from the University of Southern California. Shepard writes the food and lifestyle blog *Brown Sugar & Bourbon*. For this issue of *Gravy*, she interviewed Imani Black, founder of Minorities in Aquaculture and winner of SFA's 2022 John Egerton Prize. In 2023, she resolves to commit to a mindfulness practice.

Daniel Vaughn has always loved barbecue. When he traveled to an SFA Symposium a decade ago and realized he could parlay that love into a full-time job, he left architecture behind. Now, as the barbecue editor for *Texas Monthly*, Vaughn travels extensively to eat and write about barbecue. He is the author of *The Prophets of Smoked Meat: A Journey Through Texas Barbecue*, and the coauthor, with Sam Jones, of *Whole Hog BBQ: The Gospel of Carolina Barbecue*. His goal for the new year is to spend more time with books than social media.

TOP TO BOTTOM: Courtesy Delphine Lee; Courtesy Ryan Shepard; Courtesy Daniel Vaughn

Southern Foodways Alliance
Most Visited Places

SFAMVP

CHERYL DAY'S

Savannah

I MOVED HERE FROM LOS ANGELES. THE first time I visited Savannah, I was actually here to research my family's history. I remember sitting in one of the squares and thinking about how I could move here. My husband, Griff, and I moved to Savannah in 2000, and we opened Back in the Day Bakery in 2002. Much of the city is walkable. There's a great community of creative folks and great food. And I love the proximity to our closest beach, Tybee Island.

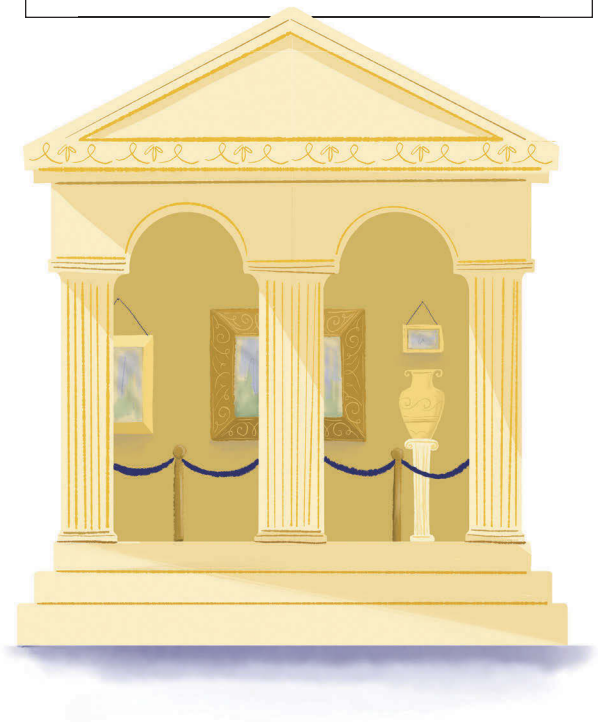
Back in the Day Bakery

We're located in the Starland District. The pandemic closure in 2020 gave us an opportunity to reimagine the space. We put in a to-go window to stay connected to our customers, started offering virtual classes, and launched Janie Q Provisions, a line of jams named after my mother. Customers can come into the retail space and shop the Janie Q line alongside some of my favorite things, like vintage cookware. I love hearing the conversations among the customers in line—the regulars often make recommendations to the visitors.

Our former dining room is now Day Studio, a light and airy space where we teach classes and host events. During the week, I teach baking classes that focus on paying homage to history—both my own family history and the broader history of American baking.

SCAD Museum of Art

I recommend checking out the Walter and Linda Evans Center for African American Studies. There are works by Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, Clementine Hunter, and many others.



E. Shaver Booksellers (and the Savannah Tea Room)

E. Shaver is a quintessential Savannah spot, located downtown in a house that dates to the 1840s. I like to browse their selection of cookbooks. If you like tea, stop by the Savannah Tea Room next door. There's not much room to sit, but you can get a tea to go and sip it while you walk around the city and take in the squares and the architecture.

The Garage at Victory North

My absolute favorite neighborhood restaurant right now is a new spot called The Garage at Victory North. Todd Harris is the executive chef. A Chicago transplant who grew up in his family's barbecue restaurant, he's a young Black chef to watch. The restaurant serves small plates—the menu changes regularly, but don't miss the collard green Caesar salad or the crispy mushrooms if they're available. The food and the atmosphere are elevated yet approachable. It's everything you want a neighborhood restaurant to be. I'm in there at least once a week.

Illustrations by Bridgette Blanton / Tiny Pencil Studio

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


MALLARD CREEK
ANNUAL BBQ
N C
PEACE
LOVE
BBQ
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

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

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

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."

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

Don Sturkey/The Chralotte 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."

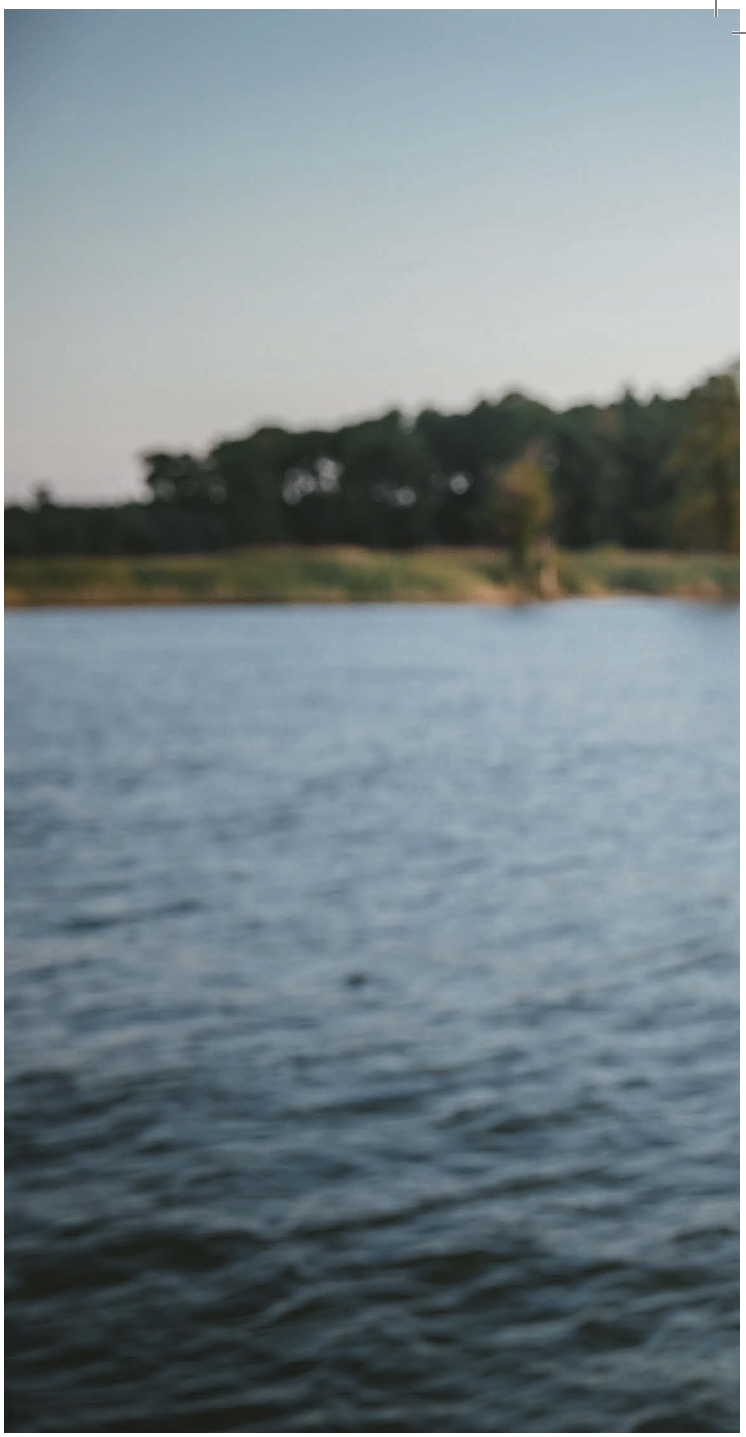
And as much as the organizers and politicians who cherish the tradition lament it, they might have to do the same. While Mallard Creek has no plans to discontinue the barbecue, everyone involved acknowledges there's no point to reigniting embers of the event's heyday. They'll savor the memories instead.

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

"A SPECK OF PEPPER IN A SEA OF SALT"

An interview with aquaculture activist Imani Black

BY RYAN SHEPARD



Photos by Caroline J. Phillips

ON SUNDAY AFTERNOONS, AFTER THE LOCAL preacher finished his sermon and churchgoers said their farewells, Imani Black and her family would drive ten minutes down the road to her grandmother's house on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Their ritual was as predictable as the tides. The children would rush to change out of their Sunday best and sit down at the table for lunch, which usually included fish or crabs. Afterwards, they grabbed their fishing poles and headed to a small bridge that arched over the nearby Chester River, a tributary fed by the mighty Chesapeake Bay.

There, they would lazily cast their poles into the water and watch their lines tense and ease as fish took nibbles of bait. Black and her siblings almost always threw their catch back into the water, an offering of gratitude for the many ways the bay sustained their family. The Blacks had a long history of working in fisheries and on boats.

From a young age, Black felt the undeniable tug of the water that surrounded her coastal community. An internship with the Chesapeake Bay Foundation when she was a teenager cemented her purpose.

Now, more than a decade later, Black is a full-time graduate student studying environmental science and the founder and CEO of the nonprofit organization Minorities in Aquaculture (MIA). The nonprofit aims to educate minority women about aquaculture and to create a more diverse and inclusive aquaculture industry. For her, starting a nonprofit was an effort to find community on the waterways that have long stopped reflecting the Black faces that used to captain them.

Ryan Shepard: Tell me about the Chesapeake Bay. What is it, and what comes out of it?

Imani Black: The Chesapeake is the largest

estuary in the world. It has one of the most unique and rich histories in the world as well. There is a lot of culture and cultural connections that are here on the Chesapeake Bay that really started during slavery. We are known for Harriet Tubman. We are known for Frederick Douglass. Those are our two martyrs. They were born here on the Chesapeake Bay and on the Eastern Shore, and so just having a place that is built off of that—it's unreal.

There's no other place like the Chesapeake Bay. When you come here and you are out on the water and you get to see the bay in its real element, you can really feel the history.

RS: Speaking of history, can you tell me about the history of Black and Brown people working in Chesapeake Bay fisheries?

IB: First and foremost we have to recognize that Indigenous people were here and they cultivated the land before anybody else. They were the first to have shellfish as part of their diet. Then settlers came over and brought their slaves with them. Then slaves became the second demographic that got integrated into fisheries.

When Black people were taken from their homeland and forced to work on the waterways here, that relationship wasn't their choice. They

had to then mend that relationship with the water in order to feed themselves.

[During the early 1800s,] enslaved African Americans were able to have slave rights to go out onto the water. Basically, this meant that if they worked out in the water, they got extra privileges because they had less supervision than they would if they were on the plantation.

That's actually how Frederick Douglass escaped slavery: He dressed as a sailor and used his navigation of the the waterways. The same thing with Harriet Tubman: She used her navigational skills and her knowledge of the tides, the water, and the marshes to help hundreds of slaves escape.

At one point, there were mostly African Americans working out on the waterways. Then the industry started booming, especially during the Industrial Revolution. That's when African Americans got left behind, because not only did they not have the capital to be able to upgrade their boats or their fishing gear to be able to go out farther where the competition was, but banks weren't giving Black people loans.

They had to settle for lower-paying jobs in shucking houses or elsewhere. There was a collective of them that became charter boat captains. But today, there are only ten or eleven living Black captains operating on the Chesapeake Bay, and most of them are over the age of sixty.

RS: Why did you feel the need to create Minorities in Aquaculture?

IB: I was going through a lot of microaggressions and a lot of bigotry, sexism, misogyny, and racism at my last oyster job. Really, I had been dealing with that my entire career, just because I am a woman in aquaculture. I am the first to say that in a lot of those spaces, it didn't matter whether I was Black or white. It only mattered that I was a woman. And there were times when it doubly mattered that I was Black and a woman.

In those times, I never had a Black woman or a woman of color I could text or call and be like, "Oh my God, I can't believe this," or "I was trying to do this, and what do you think?" There was nobody [with whom] I could really digest what was going on, and to have that safe space with.

So I thought, *Well, I'm going to create it. I'm going to bring people together, and we're going to do it together.*

RS: Let's say you accomplish everything you wish for Minorities in Aquaculture. What does success look like for you?

IB: Success would mean that I can look at my phone and call at least ten Black women that are running farms. It would make it even sweeter if they came through MIA and had some connection with the organization, but that is not necessarily a requirement.

Another wish would be for our members to continue to find value in MIA, and that we continue to advocate for them in the best ways that we can. And that we are continuously changing the culture and changing the face of the aquaculture industry worldwide.

Ryan Shepard is an Atlanta-based writer whose work focuses on food and the intersectionality of race, gender, and class. She recently earned an MFA in narrative nonfiction from the University of Georgia.

Imani Black, the founder of Minorities in Aquaculture, was the winner of SFA's 2022 John Egerton Prize. She is also pursuing a masters at the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science.

CENTER FOR
THE STUDY OF
SOUTHERN CULTURE

UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI

The Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi, located in Barnard Observatory, is the home of the Southern Foodways Alliance.

COME STUDY WITH US

Be a part of innovative education and research on the American South with our B.A. and M.A. degrees in Southern Studies, and M.F.A. degree in Documentary Expression.

Visit **southernstudies.olemiss.edu**


Menu

When It's Your First Time

BY JASON McCALL

Ordering at the local restaurant, you want to act
like it isn't the first time. Maybe you did get lucky

enough to learn a tip from your cool cousins,
maybe you remember a move

you saw on the internet. You should focus
now, but your mind can't do anything

but drift to the paradox of experience:
how can someone get some

experience when the world has no time
for beginners? You can feel the patience draining

from the person who's waiting to serve you,
and you panic and blink before you remember

that you've practiced this by yourself
a few times. But you never wanted this to feel

like a routine. Something this good should feel
natural. But now you've forgotten everything

about what feels natural and what doesn't. Your eyes
are moving fast and your mouth is moving slow

and you can't decide what to do
with your hands and you can swear you heard a breath

behind you whisper a curse so you chicken out
and order chicken fingers and walk out

with your head down and your head wondering
when a chance that good will come by again.

Illustrations by Natalie Nelson

For All the Hands I've Had to Grab Before I Could Grab a Plate

BY JASON McCALL

There are the nieces and cousins happy
to be included in the circle to show they can
hold hands and hold their eyes shut during the prayer
like the big kids they're watching from the corner
of their squinted eyes.

There are the teenage boys who never know how
to hold a hand without squeezing or pulling
away at the first syllable of "amen."

There are the grandparents and aunts and uncles whose
hands carry my family history of failures and
factories and fieldwork and footholds all cashed
in to buy us a seat at the table, to buy the table, to buy
the food on the table, to buy the gas and tickets and hotels
it took to make sure we were all at the table.

There are hands that you'll swear
are bigger every year. Hands you'll swear aren't
getting smaller every year.

Hands that talk
and tell you "I love you," "I missed you," "I know
you didn't mean it," "I know you meant it, but
you can't stop me from loving you" just
by the way they tap the back of your hand before
locking your fingers in place.

Hands that feel like a door
closing and leaving the weight of a wet winter in the yard.
Hands that feel like a door
opening and setting you free into the first bite of spring.


DICK HOWELL
BAR-B-Q
Coca-Cola

When She Says Dick Howell's Barbecue Tastes Like Home

BY JASON McCALL

You can hear from the inside of her
sigh that she gives at the end
that she's not really talking

about the smoke or how close they got
to making white sauce the right
and proper way. It's not about her being spoiled

by the flavor of North Alabama pits. When she talks, I smile
because for so long home has meant nothing
but Lysol and the lists of the dead

waiting to be freed from refrigerated trucks.
Home was the silent pauses on one end
of a video screen and the restless trumpets

of the breaking news banners. Home was an army
of doors we couldn't cross because of our parents
getting older and because we couldn't trust doctors

with her heart or my skin. And home is a hangman
that's always been waiting to take our necks,
but there's a museum in Montgomery with the names

of victims claimed by another pandemic that can sing
that song better than I ever will. Home was a light eaten
by the darkness of a passing day and eaten again and again

like the eagle taking Prometheus' liver, and that's a reminder
of monotony being its own judgment from heaven.
Home was a lesson about the Danaids, about myths and truths. And my wife

and her words were a reminder that sometimes home is smoke
and tenderness reminding us all to savor, chew, and breathe
in the only home we'll be lucky enough to know.


Kraft
FAMILY SIZE
Kraft
Slow-Simmered
Original
BARBECUE SAUCE

To the Family Who Brought Kraft Barbecue Sauce into Archibald and Woodrow's

BY JASON McCALL

This was supposed to be a poem about foolishness.
About knowing when to let perfect be

perfect, about leaving well enough and better
than well enough alone. This was going to be about Instagram

filters on *Mona Lisa* and that time the Final Four
used Jennifer Hudson's cover of "One Shining Moment."

This was going to be about Superman straightening
the Leaning Tower of Pisa, about Jordan coming back

to play for the Wizards, about Custer walking into Little Bighorn
without his biggest guns. But that's the easy answer

when we see something we can't believe to be true.
And it's easy to say the shock I shared with my friends

that Sunday was about you, but maybe it was about me.
Maybe I was shocked just like the Roman governors

who wrote back to the capital begging for guidance
on what to do with these weird fanatics that would rather be fed

to lions than play along with polytheism.
Maybe I was just like the dumb faces in the crowd

watching Meredith or Malone walk across campus
and change the world. Maybe I walked out hiding

a laugh because, sometimes, we laugh when we're nervous,
and maybe the hardest thing for me to understand wasn't the choice

of sauce, but the choice of choice. This really isn't a poem
about foolishness or purity or taste. This is a poem about wonder

and wondering what it's like to own something enough
to dress it and swallow it any way

you wish when you know the world
might be watching. Buying a plate of barbecue

and owning a plate of barbecue are two very different things,
and I thank you for that lesson.

Jason McCall is the author of one essay collection and half a dozen collections of poetry. An Alabama native with an MFA from the University of Miami, he spends his days teaching at the University of North Alabama and his nights praying for the day that Florence (AL) gives him a restaurant that serves gyros and fries.

Bajito y Despacito

From barbacoa to barbecue and back

by GUSTAVO ARELLANO
Photos by ETHAN PAYNE

A couple of years ago, I went to a party hosted by* uno de los de mi Tía María*—one of the cousins born to my Tía María, my mom's oldest sister. There, I ate the greatest barbecue platter of all time.

Cheese-flavored Doritos covered in nacho sauce and topped with pickled jalapeños. Carne asada slathered in a fiery salsa roja. A hot dog smeared with mustard, a dash of ketchup, and more salsa. Pinto beans, Spanish rice, more salsa.

Seven of my Tía María's children bought homes on the street one over from my parents in Anaheim, California. Every summer for nearly my entire life has been a moveable feast of meat.

We call our weekend house parties a "carne asada." The term literally means "roasted meat" and specifically refers to grilled beef. It's also what we call small, informal parties where carne asada might or might not be on the menu. In other words, the term "carne asada" functions a lot like the word "barbecue."

My family is from the north-central Mexican state of Zacatecas, so our carne asadas almost always had, well, carne asada. But my cousins and uncles also grilled chicken, hamburger patties, kielbasa, brats, and chorizo. They made adobada, which is pork marinated in salsa, then chopped up

L to R: Felix Sánchez, Chepe Laredo, Josué Sánchez, Ángel Sánchez, and Eddie Sánchez in Springfield, TN, summer 2022. They are about to remove their lamb barbacoa from the pit in the foreground.

on a flattop grill. And cebollitas—charred green onions. We served ourselves a little bit of everything. There were French rolls for making tortas and tortillas for tacos.

What we did wasn't technically barbecue in the Southern sense. We weren't smoking meats low and slow. If our carnes had a smoky flavor, it was a result of char, not time. So we never called it "barbecue." But we never called it "barbacoa," either. That's a tradition from a *different* part of Mexico, usually made with lamb.

Growing up, American barbecue and Mexican barbacoa didn't mean much to me. Southern California had its own barbecue traditions. Most of them had roots in the Southeast and Texas. To our north, there was specifically Californian Santa Maria style. But when I was hungry for meat, I just waited for a family carne asada.

Imagine my surprise in 2018, when I went to a high-school graduation carne asada for the next generation of cousins from *los de mi Tía María*. On the menu were pulled pork, brisket, ribs, and macaroni and cheese. My cousin Esteban had joined the ranks of Mexican Americans who love Southern barbecue.

Over the past five years, Southern cooking has become an obsession for a growing number of second- and third-generation Mexican Americans in southern California. These pitmasters take pilgrimages to North Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas to visit barbecue joints they've found online. Back home, they try to replicate the results. Many have transformed their backyard efforts into pop-ups. Some have even opened wildly popular restaurants, like Moo's Craft Barbecue and A's BBQ, both in Los Angeles. What's strange to me is that there has been no parallel move in southern California to embrace barbacoa, even as more immigrants arrive from the barbacoa belt of southern Mexico.

Meanwhile, I've witnessed a reverse trend in the Southeastern United States, where a new wave of Mexican immigrants is selling barbacoa en penca de maguey—barbacoa wrapped in maguey (agave) leaves. In Mexico, maguey leaves are used for everything from textiles to medicines. And for thousands of years, Mexicans have used them to impart food with an earthy fragrance and flavor. That traditional wrapping also protects the meat as it cooks low and slow. Today, restaurant

Pulled pork, brisket, ribs—my cousin Esteban had joined the growing ranks of Mexican Americans who love Southern barbecue.

cooks have to use ovens to pass muster with the local health inspector. But on weekends, families and communities dig their own pits and do real barbacoa—the noun and the verb.

Last summer, I decided to eat my way through this conundrum. Why are Mexican Americans in southern California going Southern, while Mexicans who live in the South double down on their *mexicanidad*?

My survey began last Fourth of July weekend at my cousin Esteban's house in Anaheim. When I arrived, the smell of cherry wood and hickory smoke filled the driveway of the suburban home where Esteban and his wife live. Smoked chicken, pulled pork, tri-tip, and ribs sat on two racks of a Meadow Creek box smoker. Chris Young and Kane Brown's "Famous Friends" blasted on Sonos.

Was I in Anaheim, or in Nashville?

It was Esteban's first official pop-up. He and his family wore hats with the name of his burgeoning business: LEGENDS BBQ. "I'm not one," he said, "but I hope to be."

Esteban told me he developed a taste for barbecue as a teenager in the late 1990s, when his late dad, my compadre Chinto, took him to Southern-style barbecue restaurants in the Los Angeles area after the two of them worked construction. "It was like pork I had never tasted before," Esteban said. "The smokiness really was incredible."

Once he got older, Esteban began to experiment with recipes he'd find online, cooking them on an eighteen-inch Weber Smokey Mountain Cooker. Eventually, he started selling his grub and earned enough money to buy a bigger smoker.

Esteban has never been to the South, but he'd like to. He especially wants to visit Memphis, because he loves dry ribs. They were on the menu the day I hung out with him, and they were excellent.

I asked him why so many second-generation Mexicans in southern California were going all-in on Southern barbecue. "I think we just want to try new things," he said. "As good as carne asada is, it burns out. You want to get something else down. And now there's so much television and YouTube and TikTok, you see something and think, 'Well, why can't I do it?'"

My next stop was in Nashville for barbacoa. Before the trip, I asked Julio Hernandez, the Nashville-based *tortillero* behind Maíz de la Vida, if he knew of any spots I should try. He gave me an address and a date and said, "*Caile*." Come on down.

I landed in town around 8:30 on a Thursday night in early August and immediately drove about an hour away to the home of Felix Sánchez, a landscaper. In his backyard, Felix and his brother Josué, a line chef at Nectar Urban Cantina, built a three-by-three-foot brick pit where they host barbacoas every couple of months.

Felix is soft-spoken; Josué is rambunctious. They're from San Pedro Añañé in the Mixteca region of the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca. The two came to Nashville in 2006. They built the oven with some friends three years ago because they missed the barbacoa from back home. The first time they made their traditional dish, barbacoa de borrego (mutton), they bought a sheep from a local butcher and called their mom on FaceTime for advice on how to properly slaughter the animal.

The brothers continue to do things the traditional way, save for one key point: Back in Mexico, their grandfather taught them to poke a hole in the leg of the sheep and blow into it with a reed to make it easier to skin. Here in Nashville, Felix and Josué use an air compressor.

The night I visited, they were going to barbecue a goat. Their friend, Chepe Laredo, the chef de cuisine for Maíz de la Vida, had marinated the goat overnight in the style of *his* region of Oaxaca, la Costa Chica. Cooks from this Afro-Mexican community on the Pacific Coast rub their meat with chile puya, cumin, and black pepper, a spicier blend than Mixtecan barbacoa.

We passed around bottles of mezcal while waiting

Josué Sánchez adds pine logs to the barbcoa pit.

for pine logs to turn into coals. Cumbias and banda played nonstop. We even sang karaoke. It was 10:30 on a weeknight.

I asked Josué if the neighbors ever complained. "They came the first time and asked what we were doing," he said. "But then we gave them a plate, and they've been coming over ever since. You don't go find friends. Friends come."

Once the coals were ready, Chepe brought out the goat, which had been marinating in a small tub. He and Josué wrapped maguey leaves around the meat, put foil on top of the tub, then lowered it into the pit with hooks made of rebar.

Josué explained to me that they usually sprinkle a layer of masa under the barbacoa to catch all the drippings. This time, though, they were going to keep the consommé for a second barbacoa the following day.

Everyone grabbed a dried chile de árbol and threw it into the pit to ward off *el mal ojo*—the evil eye. Everyone except the one white guy, that is. He ate the chile by accident.

Felix, Josué, and Chepe covered the oven with cast-iron slats, then an orange metal traffic sign that read ROAD CLOSED AHEAD. Josué layered on sheets of cardboard that had been soaked so as to not catch fire. Finally, everyone grabbed a shovel and covered the pit with dirt. When we were done, Josué poured mezcal on the mound in the sign of the cross, then placed two crossed shovels on top.

In twelve hours, we'd have brunch.

The following morning, I returned to Felix Sánchez's house. There were more people now, ready to eat.

"*Resucitamos al difunto?*" Josué cracked. Shall we raise the dead?

We shoveled off the dirt, removed the cardboard and metal slabs, and lifted the tub. Josué and Chepe unwrapped the maguey leaves. The goat now swam in a sea of ruby-red broth. Josué grabbed a rib. The meat slipped off like water from a faucet.

More mezcal flowed. Who cared if it was only ten in the morning? The barbacoa was so flavorful—soft, spicy, luscious—that it didn't need salsa. Josué plans to open a food truck and sell this style of barbacoa, along with lamb. I asked if he ever did brisket. "Of course, it's good," he replied. "*Pero lo nuestro es* único." What's ours is unique.

A couple of hours later, we all went to a second barbacoa at the house of Robbie Mezanava. He's a native of Los Angeles, an Army veteran, and a chef. Today, he'd be cooking lechón—suckling pig.

As we waited for the logs to burn down, Robbie built an impromptu brick pit on his patio. This is where his lechón would twirl for two hours.

Robbie moved to Nashville in 2014 and quickly fell in love with Southern barbecue. But for him, practicing Mexican meat traditions in the South is a way for him to maintain his culture rather than be subsumed by the dominant local one. "Open fire was all my parents had back in Mexico," he said. "Barbecue is like a tribute to our ancestors."

When I told him that the Mexican Americans of his generation back in California were cooking Southern-style barbecue, Robbie laughed. "Man, my brisket would beat them any day! Do we need to go down to Cali and show them what's up?"

The lechón was fantastic, but we were still hungry. Bourbon flowed. Someone threw some arrachera—skirt steak—on the grill. Julio brought out some of his tortillas and heated them just underneath the lechón. Barbacoa met carne asada met barbecue.

The following day, I drove up to Bowling Green, Kentucky for my final barbacoa stop. Victor Olivo

Sr. and his family sell beef barbacoa from their taco truck in Portland, Tennessee, in the style of San José de la Paz, Jalisco. That's the city whose expats—a group of people who call themselves *los restauranteros*—have dominated the Sur-Mex restaurant scene for the past forty years. If you want to roll your eyes at the most infamous dishes of Sur-Mex—arroz con pollo, which is grilled chicken breast and rice drowning in cheese sauce; or the Speedy Gonzales combo plate—that's them.

But that was a previous generation. Victor and his family moved to Bowling Green in 2002 after spending a decade in southern California. They opened a taco stand in Portland because there wasn't one around there at the time. The Olivo family sold traditional taco meats like chicken, carnitas, and carne asada. And they began to dabble in barbacoa.

Victor told me that, at first, his clientele in Tennessee didn't understand barbacoa. Most of them had never tasted beef cheeks, the preferred cut for barbacoa in San José de la Paz. "But when I tell them it's Mexican barbecue, they immediately get it," he said.

The Olivos invited me to their home for dinner. There, the family matriarch, Josefina Vargas Ibarra Olivo, who had spent the summer with them on vacation from her native Jalisco, was cooking beef barbacoa in a pot. She had already cooked the beef for hours by the time I arrived. Next, she was going to simmer the meat in a red salsa for a couple of hours more. Back home in Jalisco, Doña Josefina would wrap the barbacoa in banana leaves, but she wasn't able to find any in Bowling Green.

I asked her how she felt that her son was selling a simpler version of barbacoa in the South. *"Le doy gracias a Dios que no se perdieron acá solos, porque no está facil,"* said Doña Josefina. I give thanks to God that they didn't get lost here alone, because it's not easy.

Victor sat at the dining table. He, his wife, and his son, Victor Jr., had just returned from a long day of work. I asked Victor Sr. if his mom's style of barbacoa would ever make it to their restaurant. "Nah, the South isn't ready for something like this," said Victor Jr.

"¡Como que no!" Victor Sr. playfully shot back.

Seven of my Tía María's children bought homes on the street one over from my parents in Anaheim, California. Every summer for nearly my entire life has been a moveable feast of meat.

I explained to the two the concept of low and slow—bajito, y despacito—and told them I wasn't surprised that Southerners embraced their barbacoa. Something clicked in Victor Sr., because he shot up in his chair and enthusiastically agreed.

"Oh, that's it!" he said. "That's essential. If it's too hot, *se quema*. It'll burn! It's a way of life."

This was the barbacoa we ate. *Bajito y despacito*.

As I ate my way through Nashville and Bowling Green, I kept sending photos of barbacoa back home to both Esteban and Danny Castillo, the Cal-Mex barbecue king behind Heritage Barbecue in San Juan Capistrano. The exact same weekend as my Tennessee and Kentucky trek, he held a huge festival with Mexican American grillers and smokers showing off their goods. He sent me plenty of photos so I could feel the FOMO. But when I sent photos of *my* adventures back to him, he stopped.

"Bro, that looks like some good shit," Danny texted back. "I gotta invite them next year to my festival!"

Barbecue and barbacoa are brothers from a different madre. Mexican Americans in both SoCal and the South are keeping old traditions alive while exploring new ones. And who knows? Maybe one day, the *compas* will meet.

Gustavo Arellano is a Gravy *columnist and host of the podcast* The Times: Daily News from the L.A. Times. *This piece is adapted from his presentation at the 2022 Southern Foodways Alliance Fall Symposium.*

EVERYTHING BUT THE PIG

American Muslim barbecue is local, global, and the most fun I've had on WhatsApp.

by S. FARHAN MUSTAFA
Illustrations by Molly Brooks

I SET OUT LAST SUMMER TO ANSWER THIS QUESTION: WHAT IS AMERICAN MUSLIM BARBECUE?

As an Indian Muslim who grew up in Greenville, North Carolina, I had my own ideas about that experience. When I told my family what I was writing about, they were only concerned about my potentially "representing Islam," given that I occasionally enjoy pork barbecue. Not that it would disqualify me, for every single bite is always accompanied by the tang of guilt along with peppery vinegar.

I learned that American Muslim barbecue is closely linked to the history of Southern barbecue, while at the same time evolving rapidly and spinning off new subgenres. Unsurprisingly, the one commonality across American Muslim barbecue is that there's no pork involved. But beef, chicken, lamb, goat, and fish are all on the menu. The meat they use is *halal*, meaning "permissible," or *zahiba*—that is, slaughtered according to Islamic rules. I think of how Southern barbecue cooks long passed down their techniques through the oral tradition. Now, first- and second-generation Muslim immigrants to the United States are building upon those foodways in real time, at digital speed. They're passing along half-secrets and plenty of judgments in the liveliest WhatsApp group chat I've ever been a part of, called Halal BBQ Pitmasters. And to understand how we got here, it's helpful to know a little more about Muslim American history.

There are approximately four million Muslims living in the United States. Islam is also the fastest-growing religion in the country, with Hispanic Americans comprising the fastest-growing group of converts. Demographically, roughly a quarter of Muslims in the United States are Black or African American; a quarter are of Arab descent; a quarter are of South Asian descent; and the remaining quarter a mix of Southeast and East Asian, Hispanic, and white. Remarkably, there's no majority race or ethnicity among Muslims here. I've long taken pride in being a part of this community, where diversity and unity intersect.

The first Muslims came to the United States against their will on slave ships. It's estimated that between ten and thirty percent of enslaved Africans brought to the Americas were Muslim, primarily from West Africa. Scholars' estimates range from 40,000 enslaved Muslims in the continental United States all the way to three million individuals across North America, South America, and the Caribbean. We know from the few surviving Muslim slave narratives that it was hard to practice Islam. Some adherents hid in plain sight as converted Christians. Their diets were largely vegetarian by force and circumstance. In the narratives I read, I did not find any accounts of barbecue.

The next wave of Muslims came around the turn of the twentieth century to help build America through factory work. Roughly ninety thousand Arabs from Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, and Jordan settled in the Midwest. While the vast majority were Christians, about ten thousand were Muslims. Thousands settled in Michigan in

the 1910s to work in automotive plants. Muslim Americans in Highland Park, Michigan, were among the workers who assembled Model T Fords. And there, in 1921, they built one of the first mosques in the United States.

The final big wave of Muslim immigration to the United States began after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. By the end of the twentieth century, another one and a quarter million Muslim immigrants had made homes in the United States. They came primarily from South Asia and the Arab world, and later, Africa and Eastern Europe. In this century, Muslims continue to represent a large portion—roughly thirty percent—of new immigrants.

Thanks to this history, Muslim foodways in the United States are rich and diverse. And another group, Black and African American Muslims, bring integral contributions to the table. Wallace Fard Muhammad founded the Nation of Islam (NOI) in the 1930s. Under its second leader, Elijah Muhammad, the NOI gained popularity and followers alongside the broader Black empowerment movement of the 1960s and 1970s. For some African Americans, embracing Black power meant rejecting foods perceived as unhealthy relics of the era of enslavement. Abstinence from pork was a dietary and political choice that cut across religious lines.

Brother Abdul-Rahim, a Black Muslim leader in my hometown of Greenville, North Carolina, joined the NOI in 1971. His study of the Quran led him to convert to Sunni Islam in 1975. For years, Brother Abdul-Rahim prayed with a small Muslim community in nearby Kinston and celebrated Muslim holidays with a larger

Unsurprisingly, the one commonality across American Muslim barbecue is that there's no pork involved. Beef, chicken, lamb, goat, and fish are all on the menu.

congregation in Raleigh. He had eaten pork growing up but eschewed it after his conversion. Luckily for Brother Abdul-Rahim, he already knew how to barbecue chicken. That dish, which became his specialty, is also (coincidentally or not) a local favorite. Greenville's long-beloved B's Barbecue serves a barbecue chicken that's just as popular as its pulled-pork sandwiches.

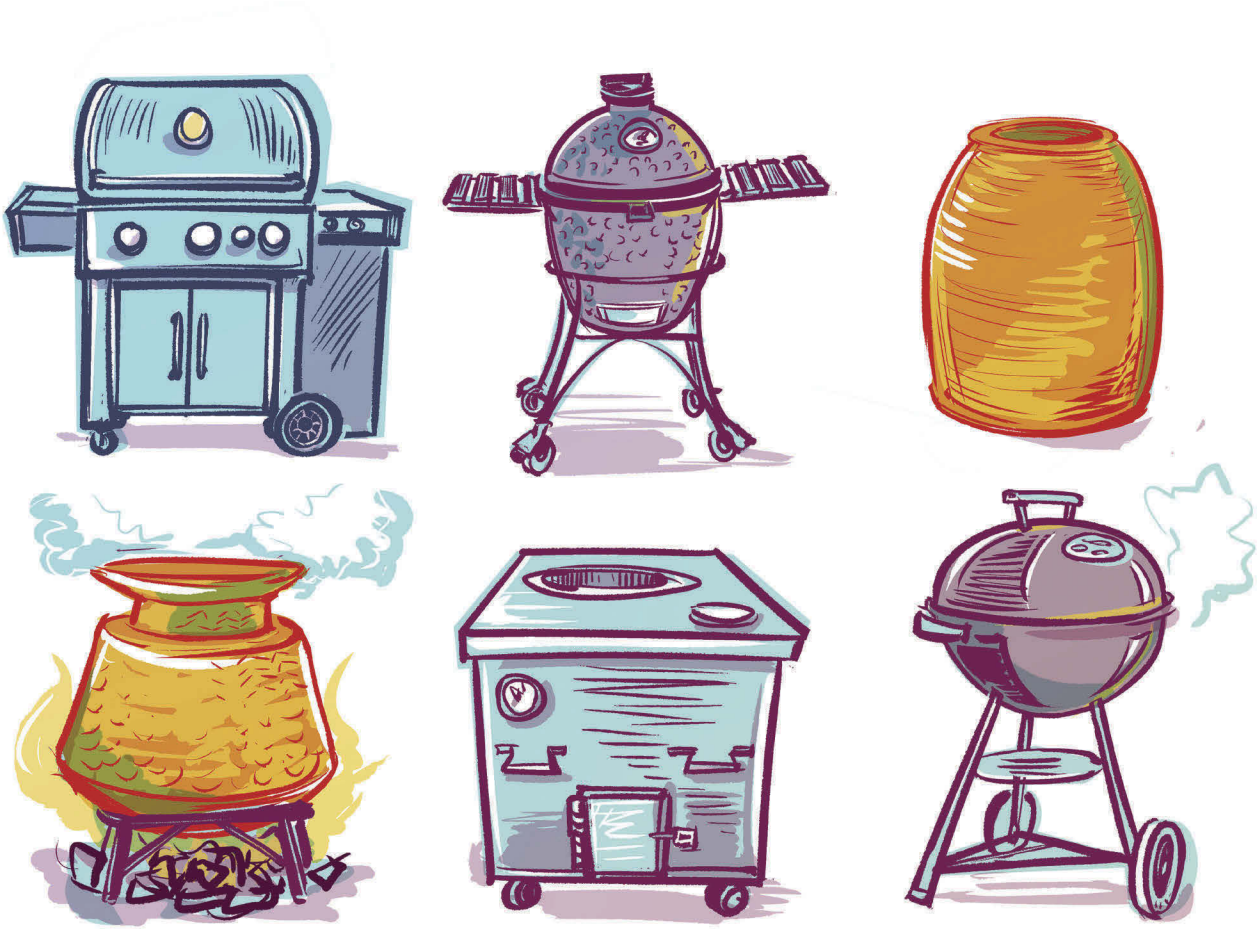
In the 1980s, more Muslim families began moving to Greenville, many of them drawn by jobs at East Carolina University and its growing medical center. Brother Abdul-Rahim welcomed them with barbecued chicken—and in doing so, he picked up some new techniques. He still speaks wistfully about the first time an Afghan Muslim transplant, Professor Abdul-Shakoor Farhadi, showed him how to marinate chicken in yogurt before barbecuing it.

Southern barbecue has a long history of flourishing at religious events. American Muslim barbecue is no different. At the potlucks and cookouts I grew up attending, I remember arguments about whose meat would go on first. The adults working the grill or smoker had to play the role of diplomats, ensuring that our multiethnic, international community was fairly represented over the coals. Eids in Greenville weren't complete without Brother Abdul-Rahim and Brother Amin tag teaming on barbecue chicken, graciously letting others carve out room for foil packets of roasted lamb, delicate shaami kebabs, and hamburgers. Brother Yusuf fried trout, catfish, and whiting in his giant cast-iron pot. The cooking wasn't necessarily low and slow by traditional Carolina barbecue standards, but our cookouts shared almost everything else with those of our neighbors. Except, of course, the pig. We talked, throwing back cans of Coke and cups of chai, about food, politics, and community gossip. I remember going to pig pickings with non-Muslim friends and listening to the adults talk about the exact same things.

And I suspect, to my parents, our celebrations felt something like home. My family is from the city of Lucknow, in northern India, where coal cooking and smoke flavor define the cuisine. (In fact, a lot of folks across the Muslim world still cook everything on wood stoves.) We build our tandoors from clay and hammer out giant pots from copper. I can still see my *dadi*—my grandmother on my father's side—whom we'd visit in India every three years or so, squatting next to a *degh*, a heavy metal pot with a rounded bottom. She'd drop a hot coal onto a bit of ghee in a little aluminum bowl, place it into a pot of chicken curry, and then close the lid, letting the entire curry smoke. I remember her rubbing goat pieces with masala paste and tucking them into a pot, sealing the lid with dough. It would cook for hours over a low fire in the *aangan*, or courtyard.

In the Muslim cuisine of Northern India, it's not just the meats that take on smoke, but vegetable stews, dals, and even kachumber, the ubiquitous salad of tomato, cucumber, onion, chile, and cilantro. As Southerners know, the juice that collects at the bottom of any bowl of tomato salad—salty, acidic, and sweet—is heavenly. As a kid, I'd secretly drain the collected juice from a potluck bowl of smoked kachumber into a Styrofoam cup. The cornsticks from Parker's Barbecue were my preferred dunking vehicle. I smelled the same smoky aromas—coals, fat, and spices—through the open windows of my parents' car as we drove home across Greenville. On summer nights, it might have been a neighbor's barbecue; on Saturdays in the fall, an ECU tailgate. I still remember how we had those smells in common.

Southern barbecue has a long history of flourishing at religious events. American Muslim barbecue is no different. At the potlucks and cookouts I grew up attending, I remember barbecued chicken, foil packets of lamb, and delicate shaami kebabs.



Last summer, I fell down the rabbit hole of American Muslim barbecue through a WhatsApp group called the Halal BBQ Pitmasters. For the uninitiated, WhatsApp is an app that's just like iMessage, but for people with green cards. It's the way everyone here stays connected with family and friends back home, around the globe. I was briefly an investigative journalist with *Al Jazeera*, and this is most fun I've had undercover as a practicing Muslim. In this group, there are more than 300 Muslims, mostly American Muslims with roots all over the world, talking night and day about barbecue. It's so popular there are subgroups, organized by geography and gender. In the main chat, they mostly post about brisket. Chicken is a close second, then goat. Recently someone asked a question about eating alligator, which prompted a quick scan and analysis of Islamic scholarly texts on eating reptiles.

Zahid Ahmed, Dallas-based physician in his mid-forties, founded the group. The child of Pakistani immigrants, Ahmed grew up in New Orleans. He says he heard the "usual" insensitive comments growing up as a Muslim in a mid-sized, cosmopolitan Southern city. Those comments were more frequent when Ahmed was a medical resident in a smaller town during the decade after 9/11. "Bless your heart, you speak English really well!" possibly well-meaning patients would say. Others, not so well meaning, asked, "How come y'all don't apologize for 9/11?" They might conclude, "Well, you're one of the good ones." I've heard comments like these, too. I call them xenophobia's greatest hits.

Ahmed couldn't understand how Islam's nearly two billion global adherents translated to a community that often felt invisible or misunderstood in the United States. But sometimes those clumsy questions led to honest conversations about Islam with folks who genuinely wanted to learn. Ahmed looked for ways to build on the sense of hope those encounters gave him. When he eventually settled in Dallas, he began smoking Texas-style brisket with a group of fellow Muslim barbecue aficionados. Six years ago, the group hosted their first halal barbecue competition, just for fun. They recruited a couple barbecue judges from

their local community and cooked for a crowd of thirty or so. The next year, they did it again. This time, over two hundred folks showed up. Eleven teams competed, with local chefs vying for spots as judges. The event became a catalyst for building interfaith connections. A few years later, Ahmed's team became the first group of Muslim barbecue cooks invited to a kosher barbecue competition.

At a Big Green Egg barbecue event in Texarkana, Ahmed encountered another Muslim barbecue team for the first time. It was eye-opening, he remembers. His team returned home inspired to create a new spice blend that reflected their global influences. He credits that Texas Tandoori Rub with their next victory at a competition in Dallas in 2019. After that, Ahmed says, Muslims around the world reached out to him. Some wanted tips; others just wanted to share their own barbecue stories. So he started a website and, later, the WhatsApp group. In a few weeks, the group swelled to several hundred members. They hailed from Dallas, Dubai, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. Soon, the number of participants reached the WhatsApp–mandated maximum, and Ahmed was forced to keep a waiting list. By the time I discovered the chat, it was closed to new members. Ahmed told me he would send me a link to join when someone dropped out, but he warned me to act quickly once the invitation came—he couldn't hold my spot. One night last summer, I received an invitation by text message at 4 A.M. Pacific Time. By 4:03, I was in.

Lurking on Halal BBQ Pitmasters, I've seen recipes for a global array of meat preprations—Texas-style brisket, Middle Eastern kofte, Nigerian suya, and Yemeni mandi. Smoked tandoori chicken and brisket biryanis, too. And I've learned that American Muslim barbecue offers everything that Southern barbecue does, from controversial opinions and spirited debates to genuine community. There are modernists and traditionalists. Minor celebrities and unsung heroes. Tons of tips on cooking techniques and links to meat-thermometer deals. I've seen hot takes on politics and memes about married life. Halal restaurant recommendations across continents. Somehow, the chat manages to offer the same comfort of my childhood mosque's potlucks: a place to gather and feel heard.

Of course, when a topic as fraught as barbecue meets the relative protection of the digital space, someone is bound to pick a fight. It might not even be about brisket. Shortly after I joined Halal BBQ Pitmasters, I witnessed what I came to call the Great Biryani Battle of 2022, in which Hyderabadis faced off against Pakistanis over who made the best version of the totemic Muslim rice dish. Amid the flying jokes and insults, a few chat members shared photos of their favorite biryanis. And then something fascinating happened. I began to see guys trading pictures of a dish called Canton biryani. As in Canton, Michigan, a suburb west of Detroit. It turns out that there's a hyper-regional American biryani that's influenced by the local population, a combination of Hyderabadi and Arab immigrants. You can find it only in Canton. The anthropologist in me was hyperventilating.

I immediately called a Hyderabadi friend of mine, who was kind of upset that the secret was out but did confirm the authenticity of the biryani in question. As the Biryani Battle raged on, opinions proliferated on smoked brisket biryani. I hungrily took notes.

In this chat, there's a thin line between smack talk and smacking lips. How American Muslim food evolves correlates to how long communities have been here. Detroit and Dearborn, home to the largest Muslim population in the United States per capita, where you'll find second- to fouth-generation Muslim families, is where you're likely to find more Muslim barbecue restaurants and new American biryanis. In Texas, where you'll find a mix of first- to third-generation families, there are underground barbecue restaurants where you can get brisket shipped to you by just sliding into Instagram DMs or WhatsApp chats.

When people think of the immigrant experience, they often assume it's a two-dimensional Venn diagram, where we have our feet planted at the intersections of cultures. Immigrants don't just plant their feet. We move. We dance. We pull the world toward us and share out at the same time. That's what American Muslim barbecue is, too. And there's still so much to discover and create. I plan to keep learning as much as I can. Just don't tell my parents about my pork habits.

Born in Greenville, North Carolina, and based in Seattle, S. Farhan Mustafa is a full-time data analyst and a part-time freelance writer. His previous work experience includes waiting tables, cooking in restaurants, reporting for Al Jazeera English*, and founding a venture-backed tech startup.*

SORRY, TEXAS IS *NOT* SORRY FOR BARBECUE DOMINANCE

How smoked brisket conquered the world

Story and photos by

DANIEL VAUGHN

Truth BBQ, Houston, TX

MY FAMILY AND I TRAVEL INTERNATIONALLY AS MUCH AS WE CAN,

and nowadays that means I'll have a barbecue assignment or two. No matter if our destination is Mexico City, Brussels, or Melbourne, I know I'll find some new restaurant serving Texas-style barbecue. Cairo and Oslo are next on my list. In 2016, I traveled to Nyhamnsläge, Sweden, a tiny town on the country's southwestern coast, to help teach a class on Texas barbecue at a local restaurant called Holy Smoke BBQ. In Lima, Peru, while stuck in the country during the initial Covid lockdowns, we could only leave our hotel room to go to the market once a day. All the restaurants were closed, but I daydreamed about trying the brisket from El Jefe Smoked BBQ, just a short walk away.

Before we took those international trips, Texas barbecue had already spread back in the States to both coasts and major cities in between. It didn't take long for smoked brisket to dominate in the previously unconquered lands of Phoenix, Seattle, Denver, and Minneapolis. And in 2016, the unthinkable happened: John Lewis, the former pitmaster at La Barbecue in Austin, hauled his 1,000-gallon offset smokers to Charleston, South Carolina. There, in the heart of pork barbecue country, he serves smoked brisket with a bark as dark as night and Texas hot guts, a house-made spicy sausage. Lewis Barbecue convinced the sometimes-unruly Charleston customers that standing in line, waiting for your tray of barbecue to be prepared like we do in Texas, was OK. That watching as the meat is sliced in front of you means the freshest barbecue possible. Instead of just chopped pork on a plate or a bun, they got used to options like beef ribs, smoked turkey, and sausage with green chiles.

On a road trip through North Carolina last year, I got more than my fill of brisket. Prime Barbecue in Knightdale, a suburb of Raleigh; and Jon G's Barbecue in Peachland, just east of Charlotte; both opened in 2020. The butcher paper–lined trays of brisket, spare ribs, and sliced sausage from Prime could have passed muster in Austin. Standing in line outside Jon G's on a Saturday morning (the only day they're open), drinking free beers from a cooler and talking with the locals about what to expect, had me feeling at home. If I had been blindfolded during the long drive there from Raleigh, I would have sworn we had crossed the Texas border, and that's even before we got the food. It was right up there with some of the best smoked brisket you can get in the Lone Star State—even though owners Garren and Kelly Kirkman admitted that when they were growing up in North Carolina, "We didn't really think of beef as barbecue."

And that's what used to make Texas the butt of Southern barbecue jokes. We were the odd ones who smoked beef and called it barbecue. Hogcentric Carolinians would have told you it was the equivalent of building a BLT with taffy. The brisket, from the chest of the steer, became our most popular cut. Slices of that brisket, sold by the pound, define Central Texas barbecue, along

with simply seasoned pork ribs and homemade beef sausages, all wrapped in butcher paper.

Central Texas barbecue was born in the meat markets of late-nineteenth-century Texas. Many market owners were of Czech and German heritage and brought their sausage-making traditions along. We call it Central Texas barbecue because the two oldest barbecue joints in Texas, Kreuz Market in Lockhart and Southside Market in Elgin, still serve that style, and they're both in Central Texas. But meat markets serving barbecue were all over the state—at least in the parts settled by Europeans—prior to 1900. The first advertisement of barbecue for sale in America was from a butcher in Bastrop, Texas, in 1878. Meat markets and barbecue shacks followed their lead in the coming decades, laying the foundation for restaurant barbecue.

At a place like Kreuz Market, open since 1900, the important elements for producing Central Texas barbecue remain. Wood is the only fuel. The meat is seasoned simply with salt, black pepper, and a little cayenne and smoked with indirect heat. It's cut on a wood block right in front of the customer and served by the pound on butcher paper. The preferred accompaniments are a hunk of cheese, an avocado, a tomato, some pickles, and a few slices of raw onion.

In 2009, Aaron and Stacy Franklin opened Franklin Barbecue in Austin, forty-five minutes north of Lockhart. It's arguably the most famous barbecue joint in the country and is without a doubt the most influential. Franklin, whose parents operated a barbecue joint in Bryan in his teen years, built a menu based on those Central Texas principles of all-wood cooking in offset smokers. At first, Franklin seasoned his brisket with nothing more than salt and pepper. The unadorned slices of meat resting on butcher paper looked about the same as what you'd get at a Central Texas meat market, with a difference that became a game-changer: Franklin Barbecue smoked only all-natural, Prime-grade brisket.

Brisket quality hadn't been a consideration

LEFT: The chopped brisket sandwich at Cole's Bar-B-Q in Fairfield, TX; RIGHT: Pat Gee's Barbecue in Tyler, TX, has been open since the early 1960s.

***Slices of brisket,* sold by the pound, define Central Texas barbecue, along with simply seasoned *pork ribs* and homemade *beef sausages,* all wrapped in butcher paper.**

of the old-school barbecue joints. Choice grade beef? Prime? That was for steakhouses. But Franklin's brisket was different. His Prime-grade, antibiotic-free briskets were cooked until incredibly tender, a so-called "full-term brisket." When a brisket hits the counter at Franklin, it ripples like a mini-meatquake. The fatty side of the brisket is, essentially, a beef aspic suspended in cow Jell-O. The fat is buttery, and—thanks to the higher grade of beef—even the lean side has enough intramuscular fat to remain juicy. Franklin's brisket made him a star.

In 2011, *Bon Appétit* magazine called Franklin Barbecue the best barbecue in the country. At *Texas Monthly*, we named it the best joint in Texas—which really means the best in the world—in our 2013 Top Fifty Barbecue issue. Franklin had released a series of how-to barbecue videos a year earlier and went on to publish a barbecue cookbook in 2015. This went against what television shows always ingrained in viewers about barbecue's secret recipes and the worn-out line of, "If I told you, I'd have to kill you." If you were a pitmaster seeking fame, praise, and (less likely) fortune, why wouldn't you copy what the new barbecue messiah was doing?

That was a turning point in Texas barbecue. The prevailing style began to veer away from old-school Central Texas barbecue, especially in Texas's largest cities. Urban barbecue restaurants

Today's Texas barbecue is fancy, but I can't bring myself to call this new style "fancy barbecue" with a straight face. So I've taken to calling it "big city barbecue."

introduced sides like Brussels sprouts, elote, and carrot soufflé. They put kale in the coleslaw. They served desserts like ube cheesecake and chilled banoffee pie, all in an effort to differentiate themselves from the competition.

Thankfully, the wood-smoked meat persisted. So did the term "Central Texas barbecue." It became ubiquitous in and outside Texas to describe this gussied-up version that featured premium meats and sides at a premium price. The name is supposed to carry a sense of tradition, but it's usually a misnomer.

Salt and pepper have given way to seasoning salts like Lawry's, an old pantry staple that has come back into fashion as a sort of ironic throwback in Texas pitrooms. Pitmasters mop rendered beef tallow onto finished briskets to keep them juicy—and glossy for the camera. Savory pork spare ribs are now doused with sweet glazes and finished in foil for tenderness. The overhead Instagram shot, made so easy with a paper-lined tray, has turned menu offerings into a colorful palette to be artfully plated. This is a different animal than Central Texas barbecue, and that's what folks outside the state have been copying for the last decade or so.

I've struggled to find a good name for this style. Back in 2006, when Lamberts opened in downtown Austin, they were mocked for using the apparently unironic descriptor FANCY BARBECUE on their menu. The admission got a laugh back then, but times change. Today's Texas barbecue

is fancy, but I can't bring myself to call this new style "fancy barbecue" with a straight face. So I've taken to calling it "big city barbecue," because it was introduced in Austin and quickly spread to Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston, and San Antonio. (It was, and still is, less common in rural Texas.)

WHY WAS THIS VERSION OF barbecue adopted so quickly?

It's because, in Texas, we make the best damn barbecue on earth.

I've been to over 2,000 different barbecue joints around the world and eaten across the barbecue regions of the continental United States. I've enjoyed incredible barbecue meals across the country and the world. Texas doesn't have a monopoly on great barbecue. What it does have is an openness to creative innovation, especially from the state's vibrant immigrant communities, paired with an uncompromising insistence on quality.

On a recent trip to Monterrey, Mexico, I ate at a Texas-style barbecue joint called Nōmada XXI. The owners, Jesús "Chuy" Rodríguez and Farid Foroughbakhch, told me about an epic barbecue research trip they'd taken to the United States in 2015. They looked for inspiration starting in Texas, then drove up to Kansas City and over to Memphis. They had planned to continue farther east, but the barbecue they'd eaten outside of Texas was so disappointing in comparison that they returned to Texas and dug even deeper before heading back home. Their incredible smoked sausages and the bark on the brisket were proof they'd paid attention.

Scrutiny from diners and critics fosters a competitive spirit among Texas barbecue restaurants. Making it onto *Texas Monthly's* Top 50 Barbecue list (first published in 1997) is an achievement that both established and new barbecue joints strive for. They know it requires excellent barbecue served with consistency. I've been impressed by

LEFT: Pinche Gringo BBQ in Mexico City, Mexico;
RIGHT: A platter at Chef J BBQ in Kansas City, MO

smoked meats in Kansas City, Memphis, Chicago, and the Carolinas, but I've also seen some of the legendary spots pass off leftover ribs that were still chilly from the night before, serve burnt ends that could bounce across the table, and sell literal burnt ends that weren't meant to be. That kind of indifference isn't as easily forgiven in Texas.

In Kansas City, the best barbecue I've had is from a trio of barbecue joints serving up Texas style barbecue. Harp Barbecue, Fox&Fire, and Chef J BBQ all proudly serve smoked brisket and house-made sausages. They've copied plenty from us when it comes to recipes, but the influence of Texas barbecue is most apparent in their consistent quality. There's no indifference, from preparation to service. That level of care shows in the food; eventually, barbecue fiends in Kansas City will start to demand the same quality from the rest of their local joints—maybe even the legendary ones.

Nick Kindelsperger of the *Chicago Tribune* wrote in 2022 of a similar proliferation in Chicago, where the best barbecue joints in the area serve what they call Central Texas–style barbecue. Of course, it's really the newer big city barbecue style. Chicago is a city that already has a well-developed barbecue culture thanks to the Great Migration of Black Southerners to the Midwest in the mid-twentieth century. I don't want anything to threaten Chicago rib tips—or Kansas City burnt ends, for that matter.

Back in Texas, the spread of big city barbecue is still in its early stages, and it will take some patience to allow individuality to develop. The early signs are promising. I've had tatema, smoked beef cheeks similar to barbacoa, at Burnt Bean Co. in Seguin. A handful of Viet-Tex barbecue joints have brought a new energy to Houston's barbecue scene in bowls of smoked brisket pho and sausage links with panang curry. Smoke'N Ash BBQ in Arlington is the only Ethiopian barbecue joint I've ever encountered. Owners Patrick and Fasicka Hicks add berbere spice to just about everything and serve their smoked meats with house-made injera, an Ethiopian flatbread. LaVaca BBQ in Port Lavaca smokes tamales in butcher paper rather than corn husks to allow more smoke flavor in. Places like these give me hope against the homogeneity.

Between big city-fication and hybrid innovation, where does that leave the generations-old Texas joints that John Shelton Reed defines as folk barbecue? I don't know. I write about barbecue every week. I can tell a hundred different stories about a hundred different barbecue joints every year, but the highest praise I can give them is a spot on the Top Fifty Barbecue list we publish once every four years. With great power comes great responsibility, yet that damn list sometimes makes me feel powerless. The folk barbecue places are having a harder time competing, because it's not a level playing field.

More expensive ingredients don't automatically lead to a superior result, but the advantage is undeniable. There's something to be said for getting the most out of inexpensive ingredients—that's how brisket, spare ribs, and rib tips became part of the barbecue canon in the first place. But when you eat the best slice of cheaper-grade brisket next to a great version of the more expensive Prime stuff, the beef speaks for itself. Restaurant owners have to charge for those higher-quality ingredients, and they require a customer base who can pay the premium. That's why big cities have been able to embrace this type of barbecue more easily than the small towns, where most folk barbecue joints in Texas do business.

Between big city-fication and hybrid innovation, where does that leave the generations-old Texas joints?

I find comfort in a humble chopped-brisket sandwich, especially one I don't have to evaluate. It's the same comfort offered by a plate of spaghetti and meatballs at an old-school, red-sauce Italian restaurant. But when it comes to choosing the best Italian restaurant in a city, how can a food critic dismiss the obvious difference between that plate of spaghetti and the housemade pasta at the newer spot across town?

A tray of smoked meats and fixings at Kreuz Market in Lockhart, TX

If I could eat at one barbecue joint in Beaumont, I would order the links at Patillo's Bar-B-Q, the oldest Black-owned barbecue restaurant in Texas. But when it's time to evaluate how Patillo's stacks up against 1701 Barbecue—a newer, big city barbecue–style spot in Beaumont, I can't ignore the day-old ribs and parched brisket next to Patillo's links. We're not ranking the best atmosphere, the best service, or the best barbecue backstory for the *Texas Monthly* Top Fifty list. Consistency and quality are everything.

In a published conversation with Calvin Trillin in 2013, former *Texas Monthly* editor-in-chief Greg Curtis said, "Texas barbecue tends toward an ideal. There's a Platonic brisket. It exists in the mind, and you can kind of sense how far away whatever you're eating is from that ideal." What that means for me, in my line of work, is that eating a slice of brisket in Texas is less about gratification than evaluation. Is the slice tender, juicy, adequately seasoned, and smoky? With so much great barbecue tending toward that ideal, I'm rarely giddy when I experience the good stuff. Comparison is the thief of joy, they say, but it does stave off mediocrity. Maybe my job would be more fun without all the comparing, but I think Texas barbecue fans are the beneficiaries, even if they're enjoying their version of Texas-style barbecue outside of Texas. And when you combine that consistent dedication to quality with the generosity of Texas pitmasters in sharing their cooking knowledge (and the ease with which that information can be spread), a slice of barbecue inspired by Texas is closer than it's ever been, no matter where in the world you are. I just hope you like brisket.

Daniel Vaughn is the author of The Prophets of Smoked Meat: A Journey Through Texas Barbecue, *and the coauthor, with Sam Jones, of* Whole Hog BBQ: The Gospel of Carolina Barbecue. *He is the barbecue editor for* Texas Monthly *and has eaten at over 2,000 barbecue joints on four continents.*

SYMPOSIUM RECIPE BOX

Jai Williams

Chris Hunt

Kimchi Slaw

by Jiyeon Lee

I OWN AND OPERATE HEIRLOOM MARKET BBQ in Atlanta with my business partner, Cody Taylor. Our menu is intentionally small. With every dish, I want to be true to Korean cuisine while also striking a note of familiarity with our American customers. At Heirloom, we pile this kimchi slaw on top of our barbecue sandwiches. When Cody and I cooked the Lodge Cast Iron Supper at the 2022 SFA Fall Symposium, we served it on the table as part of a trio of banchan (side dishes). While you might think of kimchi as being a fermented dish, this is a fresh kimchi, meant to be served right away. It's also free of fish sauce, making it vegan-friendly. Of course, the same can't be said for our barbecue!

Serves 12

- **1 head Savoy cabbage, thinly sliced (about 8 cups)**
- **2 cups thinly sliced scallions**
- **2 cups thinly sliced carrots**
- **½ cup kimchi base sauce (recipe follows)**
- **1 tablespoon unseasoned rice vinegar**

Combine cabbage, scallions, carrots, base sauce, and rice vinegar in a large bowl. Serve fresh.

KIMCHI BASE SAUCE

Makes about 2 ½ cups

- **6 garlic cloves**
- **1 ¾ cups water, divided**
- **1 cup coarse gochugaru (Korean red pepper flakes)**
- **½ cup granulated sugar**
- **¼ cup table salt**
- **1 tablespoon freshly ground black pepper**

Add garlic and ½ cup water to a blender and process until smooth, pausing to scrape down the sides as needed.

In a mixing bowl, whisk together the gochugaru, sugar, salt, black pepper, and remaining 1 ¼ cups water until sugar dissolves. Add garlic mixture and stir to combine. Store base sauce in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to 2 months.

Jiyeon Lee is the chef and owner, with Cody Taylor, of Heirloom Market BBQ in Atlanta.

White Acre Peas and Carolina Gold Rice Middlins

by Rob McDaniel

AT THE 2022 SFA FALL SYMPOSIUM, I served this dish alongside smoked coulotte steak as part of the Tabasco Keynote Dinner. Rice middlins, also known as rice grits, are grains of rice that have been broken in production. They cook faster than long-grain rice and have a consistency similar to corn grits. Back home in Birmingham, I love to make peas and rice for a quick, relatively healthy dinner for my family. It isn't complex, and that is what makes it special. A recipe like this gives humble ingredients the opportunity to show how tall they can stand. I'm also a huge fan of black walnuts, and I try to incorporate them anywhere I can. Keepwell Vinegar out of Pennsylvania makes an apple cider vinegar–based black walnut and bay sauce. I've used it here to complement the nuttiness of the rice and add a depth of flavor that doesn't take away from the simplicity of the dish.

Serves 8

WHITE ACRE PEAS

- **1 cup dried white acre peas (you may substitute crowder peas)**
- **1 ½ quarts (6 cups) chicken stock, preferably homemade**
- **2 bay leaves**
- **8 sprigs of thyme**
- **A good pinch of salt and a few grinds of black pepper**

Place the peas in a bowl and add enough water to cover them by at least an inch. Allow the peas to soak overnight. Drain before proceeding with recipe.

Place the peas, chicken stock, bay leaf, thyme, salt, and pepper into a 2-quart pot. Bring to a boil over high heat. Once the peas come to a boil, skim off any foam, lower heat to a simmer, and cover. Cook, stirring occasionally, until the peas are tender, about 30 minutes. Remove from heat and allow the peas to rest in the cooking liquid until ready to combine with the rice.

CAROLINA GOLD RICE MIDDLINS

- **1 cup Carolina Gold Rice Middlins, such as Anson Mills (may be labeled rice grits)**
- **1 tablespoon unsalted butter**
- **2 cups chicken stock, preferably homemade**
- **1 bay leaf**
- **Pinch of salt**

Melt butter in a 1-quart pot over medium heat. Add rice and stir to coat until all of the grains are glossy. When you smell a nutty aroma, add the stock, bay leaf, and salt. Turn the heat to high and bring to a boil. When the stock boils, cover the pot with a tight-fitting lid. Turn off the heat, but leave the pot on the burner. After 15 minutes, remove the lid.

Spread the rice on a parchment-lined sheet pan to cool. It is ideal to assemble the dish with cold rice or even rice that was cooked the day before so that it absorbs the pea liquor as it reheats.

TO ASSEMBLE THE DISH

- **Cooked white acre peas in their liquor**
- **Cooked and cooled rice middlins**
- **Salt, to taste**
- **Freshly ground black pepper, to taste**
- **2 tablespoons Keepwell Black Walnut Bay Sauce**
- **Hot sauce, to taste**
- **Chopped fresh parsley, for garnish**
- **Chopped scallions (green and white parts), for garnish**
- **Extra virgin olive oil, for drizzling**

Courtesy Rob McDaniel

Heat the peas and their cooking liquid to a low simmer. Fold in the rice and add salt and pepper to taste, if you like. Once the rice has absorbed the pea liquor, stir in Black Walnut Bay Sauce and a couple of dashes of hot sauce to taste. Finish with chopped fresh parsley, scallions, and a drizzle of extra virgin olive oil.

Rob McDaniel is the chef of Helen restaurant in Birmingham, which he co-owns with his wife, Emily McDaniel.

North Carolina Shrimp Boil with Peanuts and Pepsi

by Ricky Moore

PEPSI-COLA, WHICH WAS INVENTED IN MY hometown of New Bern, North Carolina, inspired this recipe. When I was growing up, my grandmama and I used to have a treat of cold Pepsi and salted peanuts once a week. The sweet, fizzy soda with the salty-nuttiness of the peanuts left an indelible impression.

I served this shrimp boil for the Simmons Farm Raised Catfish Lunch at the 2022 SFA Fall Symposium. When I'm the one eating it, I mix some of the boil juice with melted butter and add a sprinkle of SSJ Seasoning (see below) to make my own dipping sauce.

Serves 6 to 8

- **2 pounds raw peanuts in shells**
- **3 pounds shrimp, shells on**
- **1 ¼ cups SSJ Seasoning (recipe follows), divided**
- **½ cup sea salt**
- **24 ounces Pepsi**
- **12 ounces pale ale–style beer**
- **4 ounces Worcestershire sauce**
- **4 ounces hot sauce plus extra for serving**
- **4 bay leaves**
- **2 pounds small red potatoes**
- **8 ears corn, shucked**
- **1 Serrano pepper**
- **2 pounds air-dried country sausage, sliced**
- **3 lemons, cut into quarters**
- **Melted butter, for serving**

Place the peanuts in a bowl and add enough water to cover them by at least an inch. Soak overnight. In another large bowl, toss the shrimp with ½ cup of the SSJ seasoning. Cover, refrigerate, and allow to marinate overnight.

Drain the peanuts, then place them in a large stock pot with the salt. Add the Pepsi, beer, Worcestershire sauce, hot sauce, bay leaves, and 1 gallon (16 cups) of water. Place a plate over the peanuts to keep them submerged in the liquid, then bring to a simmer.

Simmer until the peanuts are soft, about 2 hours, adding more liquid (Pepsi, water, or beer) as needed to keep the peanuts covered.

Remove the plate and add the potatoes, corn, and Serrano pepper. Cook until the potatoes are tender, 10 to 15 minutes.

Add the shrimp, sausage, lemons, and ½ cup SSJ seasoning. Cook over medium heat for 15 minutes.

Strain off all of the broth, then pour all of the shrimp, peanuts, corn, and potatoes onto a large table covered with brown paper bags or newspaper.

Serve with bowls of melted butter, hot sauce, remaining SSJ seasoning, and plenty of ice-cold Pepsi and beer to wash it down.

SSJ (SALTBOX SEAFOOD JOINT) SEASONING

Makes about 1 ¼ cups

- **2 tablespoons ground roasted peanuts**
- **1 tablespoon sea salt**
- **1 tablespoon powdered chicken soup base (bouillon)**
- **2 tablespoons sweet or smoked paprika**
- **1 tablespoon granulated onion**
- **1 tablespoon granulated garlic**
- **1 tablespoon dried oregano**
- **2 teaspoons ground black pepper**
- **2 teaspoons mustard powder**
- **1 teaspoon cayenne pepper**
- **1 teaspoon ground mace**
- **1 teaspoon ground coriander**
- **1 teaspoon ground fennel seed**
- **1 teaspoon ground allspice**

Combine all ingredients in a bowl and stir until thoroughly mixed. Store in an airtight container at room temperature.

Ricky Moore is the chef and owner of Saltbox Seafood Joint in Durham, North Carolina.

THE CASE FOR CURRY POWDER

The critics are wrong. Curry powder is authentically Indian—and it deserves a place in your pantry.

BY VISHWESH BHATT

RECENTLY I SHARED A RECIPE FOR MY pumpkin and peanut soup with a friend. The recipe calls for curry powder, among other seasonings. I told my friend that, while I generally toast and blend the spices for my own curry powder, he could use a fresh, store-bought brand without compromising the finished soup. "Is curry powder an authentic Indian ingredient?," he asked. My answer is yes, of course. Plenty of scholars and culinarians agree, yet curry powder also has vocal critics in the United States.

In her 2019 article "The Subversive, Surprising History of Curry Powder," Rohini Chaki highlights the popularity of the condiment in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England and the American colonies. She says that dishes seasoned with this spice blend were especially popular in the American South. Several recipes in Mary Randolph's popular 1824 cookbook, *The Virginia Housewife*, call for curry powder, and Randolph even includes instructions for home cooks to blend their own.

I suspect that the popularity of curry powder among white colonists gave rise to the misperception that it was a white colonial invention, a commonly held belief among its detractors. Indians who immigrated to the United States after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 are among the loudest critics of curry powder. But I've come to believe that Indian Americans who dismiss curry powder as inauthentic are ignoring the much longer history of South Asians on the North American continent.

Lower-caste Indians were brought here as indentured servants as early as the settlement of the Jamestown Colony in the early 1600s. By the end of that century, the evil of slavery had become established practice in the American colonies, and Indian indentured servants were no longer needed for agricultural labor. Some former indentured servants from the Indian subcontinent found work on trade ships. Others were forcibly moved to the Caribbean colonies to work in the brutal sugracane industry. Still others stayed on as household servants and cooks in white homes. And commercial curry powder likely has its origins in these homes. We know that serving dishes made with exotic spices, including curries, was a way for white hosts in the colonial era to show off their wealth and culture. We know that Indian servants were present in some of these houses, executing the menu requests of their female bosses.

Angie Mosier

So Indian servants likely mixed the first curry powders on this continent, but they lacked the power to capitalize on their recipes. Instead, white bosses with access to spice traders were able to profit from their servants' knowledge. A similar dynamic would play out in the coming centuries as whites appropriated and profited from the recipes and foodways of enslaved Africans.

The overall number of Indian indentured servants and their descendants remained relatively small in North America. While Indian diasporas grew and flourished in nearly every other corner of the British empire, from East Africa to Great Britain to Trinidad, it was not until the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965 that a significant Indian diaspora established itself in the United States.

This post-1965 wave of South Asian immigrants came mostly from the upper castes. By and large, they had benefited from the colonial system that had ruled and subjugated the majority of the subcontinent for centuries. I see their rejection of curry powder—and its origins in the history of indentured servitude—as a reflection of class prejudice, whether conscious or not. Acknowledging that history would be to admit that the scions of upper castes have been complicit in a system that subjugated entire nations.

Today, Patel Brothers, the largest Indian grocery store in the United States, sells bottled curry powder. It's an undeniable part of who we are and how we cook as Indian Americans. And I reject the argument that premade spice blends are, by definition, inauthentic. Back in South Asia, several such blends—garam masala, chaat masala, and more—are household staples.

It is time to give curry powder its due, alongside the earliest Indian immigrants to this country. It is time to recognize our history and to acknowledge our flaws and our prejudices. I encourage cooks from all backgrounds to reclaim curry powder as an authentically Indian gift to the culinary world.

Vishwesh Bhatt is the chef of Snackbar *in Oxford, Mississippi, and the author of* I Am From Here.


Fayetteville
Smithville
Cape F
NORFH

SMOKE GETS IN YOUR EYES

In search of Black barbecue history

BY LATRIA GRAHAM

WALK INTO JUST ABOUT ANY HOME DECOR store in the country and next to the LIVE, LAUGH, LOVE signs and the FAITH, FAMILY, FOOTBALL throw pillows, there are tchotchkes covered with quips like, WHERE THERE'S SMOKE, THERE'S BARBECUE, or REAL MEN DON'T USE RECIPES.

And then there's my favorite: RED, WHITE, AND BBQ. The creator is saying that barbecue has become a foodstuff so important to our national culture it is worth swapping out one of the colors of our flag. Slogans like these—the product of bombastic American marketing—leave out the tougher, chewier bits of history that we must acknowledge in order to understand Southern barbecue.

I've listened to barbecue purveyors reference early colonial drawings of Indigenous people smoking fish on a rack of sticks and then jump straight to present-day barbecue, skipping over centuries of culinary evolution. I've heard pitmasters say, "I don't know how this style of barbecue got here." There are three ways such aberrations happen: erasure, omission, or exclusion. Completely removing characters from the story, cherry picking facts, or outright barring folks from telling their story.

I call this "smokelore"—pasting together a version of facts that projects what we wish were true instead of what is. Families like mine get caught in the gulf between.

My family had a farm in Newberry County, South Carolina, and a produce stand up the highway in Spartanburg. I grew up in this agricultural tradition—100-plus acres of family parcels all lumped together, a legacy going back five generations.

We were farm-to-table folks before there was a name for it. That means whatever we didn't sell at our family produce stand went into five-gallon slop buckets for our hogs. Twice a week I loaded the buckets into the back of my dad's gold Ford pickup truck and drove the stinky stuff down to the barn.

Our extended family had our squabbles, but taking care of hogs was one thing everybody could agree on. It always paid off during killing time. Back then, the men in my family would process the hogs. When the work was done, every household on the Graham family land received the bounty of that labor. There were often two fires going: one for washpot cracklins and another for whole-hog barbecue. The pit for the latter still stands at the back of Graham property, not far from the shotgun house where my dad was born.

My father, Dennis Graham Jr., brought that

Illustrations by Lindsey Bailey

same ethic of community care to his work selling produce in Spartanburg. He learned from his regular customers that major swaths of the city struggled with food apartheid. From certain neighborhoods, it was two to three miles to the nearest grocery store. Four assisted living facilities were located in these same neighborhoods. The residents, many of them walker and wheelchair users without cars, had to figure out how they were going to eat. They couldn't walk for miles with a load of groceries, and Spartanburg had limited bus routes.

For years, my father did what he could to fill the need. Early on Wednesday mornings, he'd pack the bed of his truck with tomato boxes of our best produce. He would spend his day—often accompanied by me or my little brother, Nicholas—driving across Spartanburg, selling produce to customers who couldn't reach our stand. We even got an early-model, handheld EBT card reader so those on benefits could shop with us.

Each stop along my dad's route might take an hour. As a teenager, I thought the shoppers were indecisive. I didn't understand until later that, for some folks, this was the first time in years they'd had the power of choice in selecting their vegetables.

A couple of years ago, I saw a Facebook post from my hometown farmers' market, the same one that wouldn't allow my dad to be a vendor. The post heralded the opening of a mobile market: a truck and trailer that would serve neighborhoods where people had trouble getting fresh food.

Almost twenty years after my father started his route, and less than ten years after his death, I felt as though that announcement erased his years of effort. There was no acknowledgment that mobile markets were staples in Black and poor communities for generations, often run by members of those communities. Nor did the Facebook post mention the disparities that necessitated mobile vendors to begin with, particularly redlining and discrimination aimed at Black people and the poor and disabled.

My father was a part of a generations-old culture of coming to the customer. The practice goes back hundreds of years and thousand miles, from Ghananian women carrying baskets of food on their heads; to Black women in Charleston selling goods door to door; to men like the late New Orleans vegetable vendor Arthur James Robinson, known as Mr. Okra. Their methods changed with inventions like the automobile and innovations like the mobile EBT machine, but their labor made it easier for those geographically or socially on the fringes to get what they needed. The relative invisibility of their labor—my father's work included—has much in common with the smokelore that surrounds barbecue history.

Barbecue in what is now the Southeastern United States came into its own before the time of state lines. Before there were even colonies. While it's true that several authors over the past few years have reclaimed Black and Indigenous contributions to barbecue history, I wanted to understand how the erasure happened to begin with, and why it persisted for so long.

Barbacoas, a framework of sticks that supported meat as it smoked over a fire, were adopted by Spanish settlers in the Caribbean after they saw Indigenous people practicing what by then was a centuries-old method. Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto was the first to introduce domestic swine to the mainland of North America around 1539. In 1585, when Englishman Sir Walter Raleigh sent an expedition force to what is now the Carolinas, John White sketched some of the earliest barbecue methods: Two fish, wreathed in smoke from the fire below, lie on top of a rack of sticks held high by Y-shaped branches. Another pair, removed from direct heat, are being cooked on upright stakes. In a 1590 engraving by Theodor De Bry, Indigenous men tend fish cooked over a flame in a similar way.

I wanted to learn more about how subsequent documentation was lost to factual cherry picking over the centuries. So, in the fall of 2020, I took a trip to Charleston and the South Carolina Lowcountry to understand the roots of this country's culinary traditions, including the sort of whole-hog barbecuing our family used to do.

Gadsden's Wharf sits on the banks of the Cooper River in downtown Charleston. Over three hundred years ago, in Lowcountry ports like this one, bodies bound by chains emerged from ships, each soul shuffling toward auction blocks. More than forty percent of all enslaved Africans first stepped foot in the United States through this dock. Between 1670 and 1808, nearly one thousand ships containing cargos of enslaved Africans entered the port. According to the International African American Museum, which now sits on top of the wharf's location, approximately eighty percent of present-day descendants of enslaved

people can trace an ancestor back to their arrival in Charleston. Even if barbecue didn't begin in the "Holy City," many Black people who slaughter hogs and tend hot coals overnight have a connection to the town. Contemporary barbecue knowledge is ancestral.

Beauty and brutality were wrapped together and baked into the bricks that line the streets of this city, from the old Ryan Slave Mart to the Battery. The fingerprints of the enslaved people who formed, baked, and laid the bricks of Charleston's historic buildings are still visible to those who know what to look for. That same labor force helped fine-tune the cooking method of American barbecue.

Reverend Irving E. Lowery's *Life on the Old Plantation in Ante-Bellum Days, or a Story Based on Fact* underscores the notion that Black people did this hot, dirty work. Born in 1850 in Sumter County, Lowery detailed a rare celebratory meal meant to mark the wedding of two enslaved people. "Uncle Tom, the father of the groom, was an expert at barbecuing. He did a lot of it for the white folks, especially on occasions of general musters, weddings, picnics, etc.," Lowery wrote.

Oral histories from enslaved people collected by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) during the 1930s revealed how barbecue methods were refined. Wesley Jones' oral history, taken in Union, South Carolina, details his process of cooking hogs ahead of celebrations:

> Night befo' dem barbecues, I used to stay up all night a-cooking and basting de meats wid barbecue sass (sauce). It made of vinegar, black and red pepper, salt, butter, a little sage, coriander, basil, onion, and garlic. Some folks drop a little sugar in it. On a long pronged stick I wraps a soft rag or cotton fer a swab, and all de night long I swabs dat meat 'till it drip into de fire. Dem drippings change de smoke into seasoned fumes dat smoke de meat. We turn de meat over and swab it dat way all night long 'till it ooze seasoning and bake all through.

This tradition of Black cooks keeping the flame in the antebellum South shows up repeatedly. But newspaper coverage from the same period often featured white entrepreneurs who capitalized on Black barbecue techniques or relied on underpaid Black labor to do the work. Later, segregation allowed white businessowners to exclude Blacks from restaurants. By the twentieth century, white men tended to receive a disproportionate share of barbecue fame and fortune.

So much of what makes barbecue special is

ephemeral. We eat the food. Pit-hearths are covered after they've served their original purpose. The labor that made the experience possible seems to vanish like smoke.

But how does the legacy endure? My last stop was in Charleston was Rodney Scott's Whole Hog BBQ. Scott isn't from the city but was reared in the Lowcountry. His restaurant sits on the upper portion of King Street, not far from Interstate 26. Inside, tourists rubbed elbows with old-school barbecue aficionados who took their caps off when they crossed the threshold. The simple gesture felt both polite and reverential. This is one of a handful of Black establishments in the country that still barbecues the old way.

"I saw my father and my great-uncle doing it for years before they let me do it on my own when I was eleven," Scott writes in *Rodney Scott's World of BBQ*. His family has cooked hogs as long as he can remember. Growing up in Hemingway, South Carolina, almost two hours from Charleston, for Scott, cooking hogs was a pastime transferred from father to son. There are no shortcuts, and it takes years to hone the technique. The tools of the trade are often simple. Old oil drums are bent into service to transform logs to hot coals. Wire fencing is laid across cinder block–lined pits to form meat racks. A mop, very similar to the stick-and-rag mop Wesley Jones used while he was enslaved, keeps the leaner parts of the pig from drying out.

"One of the great things about cooking whole hog is that it takes so long to do it, that you just naturally gather around the pit with good friends and fellowship while the meat and wood do their thing," Scott wrote. He tries to recreate that vibe inside his Charleston establishment, the first in a growing chain that will soon open its sixth location.

While waiting for my pork sandwich plate I people watched, trying to discern the Charlestonians from the weekenders. When my food was ready, I took it to a picnic table outside. Somehow the scene of children playing while their parents waited for thir orders, R&B music playing over the speakers, reminded me of childhood family reunions. We don't do those anymore. Much of my family is dead or long gone from Newberry. The produce stand is no more. What remains is a deep appreciation for my ancestors, who built the foundation of this country and continued pursue personhood accross centuries of inhumane treatment. There are so many stories wrapped up in this pork sandwich, in my memories, and in me. This history can't be reduced to a slogan on a serving tray. By writing about it, I want to make it visible, to keep it alive.

Latria Graham is a contributing editor for Garden & Gun *and* Outside *magazines. Her upcoming book,* Uneven Ground*, which explores Black landownership and land loss through the lens of her own family's farm, will be published by Mariner Press.*

If you like *Gravy*, you'll love...*Gravy*

A production of the Southern Foodways Alliance, our podcast tells stories of the changing American South. Listen wherever you get your podcasts.

NEW SEASON BEGINS FEBRUARY 15

Lady in Green

IN HER SUNDAY-BEST CROWN AND MATCHING GREEN DRESS, Mrs. Helen Turner stopped traffic. Regular diners at the legendary Helen's Bar-B-Q in Brownsville, Tennessee, weren't accustomed to seeing her clad so regally. Most days, she's in a T-shirt and casual pants with her hair pulled back or covered—proper attire for creating magic over an open pit of barbecue. But on this day, as she posed for a photo session to honor her achievements in a discipline often dominated by men, people saw Mrs. Helen for who she has always been: a leader, a trailblazer, a queen.

Helen Turner was the winner of SFA's 2022 Lifetime Achievement Award. Visit **southernfoodways.org** *to watch* Helen: The Legend *by SFA filmmaker Zaire Love.*

PHOTO BY ZAIRE LOVE

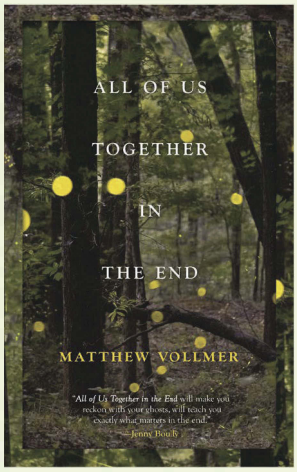
HUBCITY.ORG

Coming soon from Hub City Press

APRIL 4

"*All of Us Together in the End* will make you **reckon with your ghosts**, and will teach you exactly what matters in the end."

—Jenny Boully
author of *The Body*



ALL OF US TOGETHER IN THE END
MATTHEW VOLLMER • MEMOIR

MAY 16

"Gloden never strikes a false note. This is an amazing book that introduces us to **an exciting new voice**."

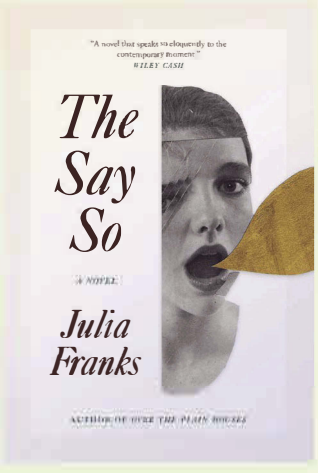
—Kevin Wilson
author of *Now is Not the Time to Panic*

THE GREAT AMERICAN EVERYTHING
SCOTT GLODEN • SHORT STORIES

THE SAY SO
JULIA FRANKS • NOVEL

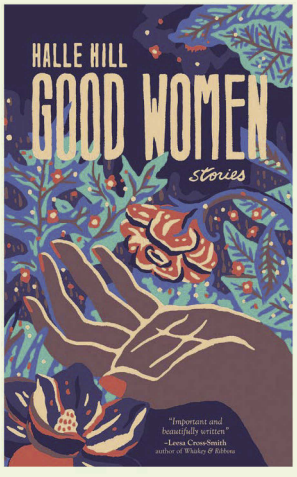
"It's rare that a novel speaks so eloquently to the contemporary moment as *The Say So* does. This is **a powerful novel**, and an important one too."

—Wiley Cash
author of *When Ghosts Come Home*



JUNE 6

GOOD WOMEN
HALLE HILL • SHORT STORIES



"**Important and beautifully written**, this collection is alive with bite and verve tick-tick-ticking on every page."

—Leesa Cross-Smith
author of *Whiskey & Ribbons*

SEPTEMBER 12

Also from Hub City Press

hubcity.org/books

SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE
Center for the Study of Southern Culture
Barnard Observatory
P.O. Box 1848
University, MS 38677

$12.00
ISBN 979-8-8857401-3-5
51200>
9 798885 740135