

FLAME AND FORTUNE

Barbecue and celebrity have always been on good terms.

BY HANNA RASKIN

IF TALKING ABOUT THE WEATHER IS THE lowest rung of small talk, sharing pictures of traffic has got to be the rock bottom of text conversations.

Yet on September 5, 2020, I received image after image of idling cars, sent by fellow Charleston residents. They guessed correctly that I'd share their fascination with the blocks-long line leading up to the drive-through window at Rodney Scott's Whole Hog BBQ on upper King Street.

"Wow," one restaurateur messaged. "The power of Netflix."

Scott, whose family started selling barbecue in rural South Carolina in 1972, launched his eponymous venture with restaurateur Nick Pihakis in 2017. After Netflix featured Scott in its hugely popular *Chef's Table* series, thousands of eaters who navigate by the stars flocked to the Charleston and Birmingham locations of Scott's restaurant. Over the 2020 Labor Day weekend, the Charleston store broke its sales record three days in a row.

"It got real crazy," Scott told me once the hour-long waits had subsided.

Barbecue has been part of the Southern culinary landscape for centuries. In the last decade, though, as the tradition has migrated from the countryside to big cities—and has been

documented relentlessly by both the professional media and unpaid fans based there—barbecue has become a singular catalyst. In the months leading up to SFA's 2022 Fall Symposium on barbecue, I hope to use this column to explore what barbecue has yielded beyond gustatory pleasure and cardiac pain.

First up: Fame.

BARBECUE AND CELEBRITY have always been on good terms. In his 2021 book, *Black Smoke: African Americans and the United States of Barbecue*, Adrian Miller profiled several "barbecue kings" who in the late 1800s and early 1900s acquired regional reputations for smoked meat excellence. And he rightly surmises that some of them would have reached even greater heights if not for racism and segregation.

It makes sense that barbecue would produce more big names than other cooking styles. Beyond the mythic dimensions of taming fire, pitmasters are alluringly off-limits in ways that your neighborhood cheesemonger isn't: After all, they do their most important work in firetraps under cover of darkness. And by virtue of their transforming a single beast into meals for scores of omnivores, they're almost assuredly known by masses of strangers.

Illustrations by Emily Wallace

AS SEEN ON TV

Bar-B-Q



Ribs



WORLD FAMOUS

BARBECUE

HICKORY-SMOKED
BARBECUE

BRISKET

CRAZY FAMOUS



BARBECUE

While I grew up in a town where Crockpots were more common than barbecue rigs, even Ann Arbor, Michigan had a well-known barbecue maker: Jesse Campbell, a native of Starkville, Mississippi. In 1974, he opened the restaurant that would eventually be called Mr. Rib.

In the early 1990s, after Desmond Howard came off the field at Michigan Stadium, students would queue up at Campbell's concession for a Soul on a Roll, a pulled-pork sandwich topped with slaw and a sweet, tomato-based sauce.

Still, the *Ann Arbor News* in 1995 reported that Campbell "had troubles with the tax man, a local landlord and a liquor store that wouldn't stay solvent. He's had trouble raising capital and, most recently, trouble with pneumonia."

That's a far distance from true celebrity and the safeguards that come with it. But in my fifteen years as a food journalist and restaurant critic, I've watched fame emerge as an essential component of the barbecue scene.

MY FIRST PAID food writing job was at the *Mountain Xpress* in Asheville, North Carolina, a city where barbecue didn't qualify as a major food group. Once, at the National Country Ham Association's annual conference, I told an attendee that I was forever explaining to visitors interested in barbecue that they'd come to the wrong end of the state.

He shook his head. "Wrong end of the pig," he said.

Either way, Asheville's interest in barbecue picked up with the opening of 12 Bones Smokehouse in 2005. Much of the restaurant's name recognition was fueled by reflected glory: In 2008, then-presidential candidate Barack Obama swung by for an order of blueberry chipotle ribs. (Those kooky ribs could well be the poster item for in-town barbecue restaurants, where menus aren't ruled by misplaced nostalgia for outdated flavors or inferior ingredients.)

It would be another seven years before Elliott Moss—whom I knew as the chef making mocha stout pimento cheese and brie mashed potatoes at a dive bar called The Admiral—would launch his eastern Carolina–indebted Buxton Hall Barbecue.

By then, I'd left town for a job at the *Dallas Observer*. I moved to Texas in 2010 knowing barbecue was a big deal there, but it turned out the genre in those days was mostly exempt from the flashiness that's a state signature. When I arrived,

the general attitude toward barbecue and the people who made it was so low-key that a Super Bowl XLV party hosted by Man Up Texas BBQ drew hundreds fewer people than anticipated.

Granted, there was a nasty ice storm in February 2011, but it's hard to imagine folks not turning out today for a free taste of what Franklin Barbecue and Snow's BBQ were serving.

"People were walking out with briskets," my friend Daniel Vaughn says of the leftover situation.

WHEN I MET DANIEL, now barbecue editor at *Texas Monthly*, he was an architect who wrote a blog called *Full Custom Gospel BBQ*.

Twitter existed in 2008, but all of its users combined sent about 300,000 tweets a day. (By comparison, that many tweets now go out every 50 seconds.) Instagram hadn't been invented. So, when Daniel took issue with a Dallas food blogger's contention that the barbecue around Dallas was only "dog food or sandwich worthy," he decided to start a blog of his own.

"I thought all the barbecue I was eating around here was fine and dandy," Daniel recalls. "The dry brisket at Peggy Sue's—which just got bulldozed yesterday—I thought that stuff was primo."

Then Daniel went down to central Texas, where the beef ravished his palate and upended his mind. He took his new appreciation back to Dallas, determined to turn up local gems by screening every barbecue joint in the DFW area.

Before long, Daniel had enough material to write a 2010 story for *D Magazine*, featuring a list of his top sixteen barbecue places. Half of them showed up on a list published soon thereafter by *Dallas Morning News* restaurant critic Leslie Brenner.

Concerned about the overlap, Daniel emailed Brenner. He received a snippy response, which he forwarded to me. Since an alt-weekly's highest purpose is to call out the mainstream press, I wrote about the incident in the *Dallas Observer*.

As Daniel puts it, "It blew up from there. Anthony Bourdain reveled in the fact that [Brenner] looked bad," because she'd panned one of Bourdain's books when she worked at the *Los Angeles Times*.

In 2012, Bourdain chose Vaughn as an author for his Ecco imprint and featured him on *No Reservations*.

In other words, Daniel got famous.



DANIEL FIRST GOT an inkling of his change in stature when he read an online comment from someone who said they weren't going to try a new barbecue restaurant until Daniel ruled on it. He knew for sure things had changed when a barbecue owner asked his advice.

Now, he says, "The thing that comes specifically with being well known is all the pitmasters want to act like your friend. You always have to question, 'Why are they inviting you out for oysters when you're in town?'"

"Our [Top 50] list [at *Texas Monthly*] comes around every four years, so you get to learn what their motivations were," he continues. "It's oftentimes painful."

But having influence also gives Daniel the chance to pop up barbecue makers who otherwise might be overlooked. Plus, he gets invited to parties that are much better than the Super Bowl debacle we attended at the House of Blues.

In 2013, Daniel flew to Seattle to meet with representatives of Amazon. By then, I had transferred to the *Seattle Weekly*, so I was there when he filmed an *ABC News* segment at Jack Timmons' house.

A Microsoft employee and 2012 alumnus of Barbecue Summer Camp at Texas A&M University, Timmons had started a pop-up brisket series using a smoker in his backyard. Daniel had that smoker in mind when he asked Timmons to join him for a follow-up residency arranged by Seattle celebrity chef Tom Douglas.

At the event, "Sir Mix-a-Lot [ate a beef rib]

and started chasing me on Twitter," says Timmons, who's remained friends with the Seattle rapper, née Anthony

Ray. The crowd's response, a clear indicator that neither the South nor Texas is big enough to contain the phenomenon of barbecue celebrity, persuaded him to upgrade from an illegal operation to a proper restaurant.

Timmons opened Jack's BBQ in 2014, one year after I moved to Charleston.

Since then, he's opened three additional locations and a Tex-Mex restaurant. When I Googled Timmons to make sure the email address I had for him was current, the first result referred to "Texas native Jack Timmons of Jack's BBQ fame."

"It's so silly," Timmons says of the public adoration, which he admits has been stoked by entertaining influencers and posing for goofy Instagram pictures. "When I grew up, Julia Child and The Galloping Gourmet were on TV, and if people asked me where I ate barbecue, they didn't have names: It was just 'the place on Garland Road.'"

By contrast, barbecue has brightened the lights around Timmons' name so intensely that it now means more to potential patrons than his ribs or brisket. He's recently opened a ghost kitchen called Jack's Chicken Shack. His Tex-Mex joint is Jackalope. He hasn't ruled out a Jack's Roadhouse.

Because when "they see 'Jack's,'" Timmons says, Seattle diners line up to place their orders. 🍖

Hanna Raskin is Gravy's new columnist. Her newsletter, The Food Section, is published on Substack.