



Stone Mountain

My Mother, Meat Alternatives, and Me

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

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

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

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

As the years ticked by, those roadside places started to disappear. Sometimes the smokehouses burned down, or the property owners raised the rent. The old men I knew who used to cook hogs on the side are dead or dying. My father died

in 2013. Last year I had to sell his farm. The way of life I remembered was no longer sustainable. The South that I grew up with was slowly fading out. More and more, the barbecue spots that I find in my travels are slick steel and glass endeavors with PR teams. These restaurants buy their meat by the piece instead of cooking whole hogs. I am thirty-four and a relic of a bygone time.

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

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

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



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

Our relationship has always been like this—playing off each other’s preferences. I prefer consistency, and she relishes creativity. Home cooked meals from my mother were a treat; she might decide to cook over the holidays or make a special dish to celebrate our birthdays, but regular weekday dinners were not her thing. A postal worker by day and a fashion designer at night, she grazed on whatever snacks were in the vicinity to squeeze in a couple of hours of sewing before bed. As the eldest child and daughter, the domestic task of feeding our

family of four fell to me. Eventually I went to boarding school, trying to escape my family and the boredom of 2000s rural life, but on weekends and holidays I resumed the day-to-day grind of cooking at home. I tried to make it interesting, graduating from things like spaghetti casserole and chicken with hand-formed dumplings to dishes like carne asada served on homemade corn cakes. I wasn’t a recipe developer yet—just a floundering teen, and later, twenty-something graduate student, trying to figure out how to run the family produce stand and forge my own identity.

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



back into the routine established when I was an adolescent. When he died, I realized my mom was in decline, too. So I stayed in my hometown and continued to care for her. On the uncomfortable days, when the medicine wasn't working, or she was frustrated about her physical abilities, the one thing I knew how to do was make sure that she had something she liked to eat. So, I did. Her comfort foods—chicken bog, or homemade pappardelle with mushroom ragù—regularly appeared on the menu. Few things

make her smile like a bowl of potato soup. I've spent the last three decades as her personal chef, figuring out what she will and won't eat.

Between her surgeries, I would take research assignments all over the South. I would return home with a cooler full of barbecue, the fat from the meat coating the paper bag it was wrapped in. I brought back smoked chicken slathered in white sauce from SAW's BBQ in Homewood, Alabama; oakwood smoked ribs from Pig Floyd's Urban Barbakoa in

Orlando, Florida; and slow-smoked chopped pork sandwiches from Sam Jones BBQ near Greenville, North Carolina. We never had leftovers.

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

If I was working in the Lowcountry, I knew better than to come back from Charleston without a plate from Rodney Scott’s. Once I picked up our usual order—the three-meat combo platter (pork, brisket, and ribs) for me and whole-hog sandwich platter with collard greens and potato salad for mom, but left the restaurant without a bowl of his banana pudding. I made myself do a U-turn. Hours later, when I got home, I put the dessert on the table and told mom of my exploits, joking that if I came home without it, she might just make me do the 200-mile trip back to Charleston. Caring about what she ate and serving

her things she liked was the closest I could get to telling my mother that I loved her. So I made sure she had her banana pudding. Her discerning palate allowed me to form my own strongly opinionated and unapologetic proclivities about what I considered to be good barbecue—something that women in our family didn’t often get to have.

But something was wrong with my mother now, and the doctors couldn’t quite figure out what it was. She didn’t get out much anymore. Too young and vibrant to put into a long-term care facility, I watched her decline and spend more time in her recliner. By early 2021, she was willing to try anything to improve her health. She decided to try giving up meat. To my mother, changing her diet felt like a bid to save her life. I missed the witty, creative woman I grew up with. After a decade of functioning as her main

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caregiver, I supported her decision as an olive branch to try to save our relationship. So, when I heard about Grass VBQ Joint, a vegan spot in Stone Mountain, Georgia, that cold-smoked their offerings, I suggested this little road trip. Maybe, just maybe, our barbecue adventure could change the way we engaged with each other. It was a lot of pressure to put on some plant-based meat, but amid a global pandemic it felt like there were few options we could explore together.

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

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

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

my environmental impact. Then, it felt, my mother forced my hand.

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

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

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

What did I love so much about barbecue? Was it the bite of the blend of wood-smoke, salt, sugar, paprika and peppers that called to me? The slight crunch of the umami-packed bark on ribs that have been charred to perfection? Was it the texture of the meat, how it felt in my mouth? In my Greenville grocery, I found Louisville Vegan Jerky Co.’s Smoky Carolina BBQ.

It had the tang I missed and the chew I was used to, but it didn't fill the hole. Some of these offerings contain a great deal of salt. How sustainable was this way of eating? I am still working through how much better these plant-based, soy-forward options are for the planet. A Texas-based company called All Y'alls Foods makes a black pepper and sea salt flavor soy jerky that tastes of smoke, but I still felt something was missing. It led me wonder if I should just satisfy myself with grilled vegetables and well-seasoned greens and let go of this notion of plant-based barbecue altogether.

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

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

"You know what I like," she told me before nestling down in her heated seat

as the rain steadily thrummed on the windshield. I got her Da Clucker, a faux-chicken sandwich made with seitan, dressed in white sauce, with a side of smoked mac 'n' cheeze. I ordered a smoked brat sandwich made with Beyond Meat—a mixture of peas, beans, and brown rice—and a small dish of stout beer baked beans.

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

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

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

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