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High on the Hog - A South Carolina BBQ Journey

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Barbecue in South Carolina is a story of struggle, interdependence, joy, and improvisation. It’s about people, shared traditions, and a sense of place. To understand barbecue history in the Palmetto State is to acknowledge the contributions of multiple traditions—African, Native American, and European. Once separate streams, these traditions flowed together early in our history to form the mighty river that is South Carolina slow-cooked pork. The more time I spend around piles of felled hardwood, smoke-stained cook sheds, and cast iron hash pots, one thing is clear—barbecue is not a tradition to be romanticized. Enjoyed now as comfort food, barbecue has roots in a culture of improvisation and survival. For hundreds of years, slow-cooked whole hog was a way for people to prepare an available staple. Well into the twentieth century, rural farmers cooked hogs for supplemental income and communities frequently pooled resources to fire up a pot of hoghead or beef hash.

Early colonists found the hog perfectly suited for conditions in the South. Low maintenance and manageable in size, hogs could be let loose to fend for themselves in the thick forests of Virginia and the Carolinas. In the case of the small farmer, the butchering and cooking of a hog was not only a necessary part of life, it provided family and friends with an important social occasion. This was a community event—neighbors assisted with the cooking, musicians turned out fiddle tunes, children stood “at the elbows” of the older folks stirring the hash pot. Stories were told around the barbecue pit, back porch, and kitchen table. Problems were shared—gossip told. This was a time of release from the vagaries of working the rock strewn fields of the Piedmont, the sandy soil of the Pee Dee, or rice fields in the Santee Delta. Barbecue was about the dirty, sweaty work of digging a pit in the backyard and eviscerating hogs. But it was also about the joys shared by family and friends—life’s celebrations and struggles. Local foodways were inseparable from the seasonal nature of agrarian life.

Traditional South Carolina barbecue is rooted in family and community culture. Long before the formal barbecue restaurant was established, folks traveled county roads selling barbecue from the trunk of the family car or the bed of the pickup truck. Those who developed reputations as skilled pitmasters were soon in demand—called on by churches, civic groups, and other community organizations to fire up the pit for the annual fundraiser or social event. These early barbecue cooks mastered the catering business long before catering became a standardized industry.

The barbecue restaurant we know today was born out of this itinerant pitmaster tradition and family “shade tree” cooking. Unlike the collective Petri dish of mass-produced food, local barbecue joints maintain a firm grip on their agricultural heritage. While many have phased out such
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traditional delicacies as souce, liver pudding, and hoghead hash, they have a clear vision of their past—their roots. Symbolism runs high—PawPaw’s cast iron kettle, Dad’s heralded sauce recipe, Auntie’s special coleslaw. In most cases, the restaurant is less about food and more about the people behind the recipes, the socially-rich process of cooking and the equally important act of consumption.

During South Carolina’s turbulent history, enslaved Africans, sharecroppers, marginalized Native Americans, and upstate mill workers cultivated dynamic food traditions. These culture groups did not exist in a vacuum. Blacks, whites, and Native Americans prepared and consumed foods that were readily available while constantly reinventing their respective cuisine through the influences of surrounding cultural traditions. Regional South Carolina barbecue was born largely through Native American cooking methods, African seasoning, and the swine of European settlers.

No matter the particular sauce or ingredients—chicken bog, hash, puddin’ pot, whole hog barbecue—all of these maintain regional differences that reflect the diversity of the environment and the people doing the cooking. Barbecue continues to be about sustaining a sense of community. But why such variety? Like a folk artist maintains a sense of individuality while perfecting certain skills under the tutelage of family, friends, or community members, barbecue chefs and hashmasters add their own signature to the recipes of past generations.

Surrounded by nostalgia, barbecue can serve as a way to honor ancestors who labored during a much different time. The ears, hearts, and tongue of hogshead hash are no longer savored because survival depends on using every bit of the hog. Today hashmasters can afford to make hash out of the “finer” cuts—shoulder, Boston Butts, and hams. Yet, if you look in the right places you can still find a fine batch of hogshead or liver hash rolling in a pot. Symbolism and tradition are powerful social binders that reaffirm community identity. These deeply held traditions are felt by fewer people today. The cultural demographic is changing. Prior to the 1960s, getting some barbecue meant one of two things—you either did the cooking yourself or you knew those folks in the community whose culinary reputation preceded them. We have it easy now. On any given day, good barbecue can be found on a buffet line somewhere in the state. Fortunately, there are still those who value the toil and struggle of the early barbecue pioneers and their vigilance allows us to enjoy a heaping plate of South Carolina history.

Acknowledging our collective dependence on automobile travel, I recently decided to take a trip across the state to visit some of my favorite barbecue restaurants and discover a few new destinations—a metaphorical journey through the gastronomic landscape of the Palmetto State. I traveled from the coast to the foothills and visited only restaurants that were a short drive from the interstate highway system. As such, fellow travelers can easily bypass the chain restaurants poised near off ramps and make the short side trip to visit these little barbecue gems.

I have long since abandoned the futile exercise of naming a “favorite” barbecue joint. That’s akin to naming a favorite child—you love them all and they each bring different qualities to your world. I am a purist at heart and hold those who insist on cooking on wood in highest esteem. At the same time, I acknowledge the ingenuity of those who have developed electric and gas-fired cooking contraptions. A key part of any healthy tradition is the ability to adapt and change over time. The six restaurants I visited share more differences than similarities. Some cook on wood and some slow-cook in gas or electric cookers. Hash might contain beef, pork or a healthy mixture of both. Several have been around for years and others are just getting started. Underlying all of these differences is one strong, common thread—a connection to community and family. Eating at these restaurants is akin to pulling up to the family dinner table. Family recipes, community-based lore, and a staff normally made up of extended family and lifelong friends are key ingredients at all locations. So pull up a chair, grab a glass of sweet tea, and enjoy some darn good ‘cue.

MOMMA BROWN’S BARBEQUE
1471 Ben Sawyer Boulevard, Mount Pleasant, SC 29464
843.849.8802
Hours: Tuesday thru Saturday 11:00 a.m. - 8:00 p.m.;
Sunday 11:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.

One of three restaurants operated by the Brown family. With deep roots in Williamsburg County, the family operates three barbecue restaurants in Kingstree, Monck’s Corner, and Mount Pleasant. Located in an old convenience store, the Mount Pleasant location turns out a healthy buffet featuring red rice, rice perloo (perlow), pork hash, smoked turkey, fried chicken, pork ribs, a wide variety of vegetables, and pulled pork in two varieties—stout vinegar-pepper or mustard-based. Those who like the illusive rutabaga will be thrilled to find them featured regularly on the buffet. Pork is pulled—no chopping here—and as moist as you’ll find anywhere.
LONE STAR BARBECUE & MERCANTILE
2212 State Park Road, Santee, SC 29142
803.854.2000
Hours: Thursday thru Saturday 11:00 a.m. - 9:00 p.m.; Sunday
11:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.
Lonestar Barbecue & Mercantile is not just a barbecue
restaurant, but a barbecue environment. A formally trained
chef, owner Chris Williams has incorporated a wealth of
knowledge into his cooking. A marriage of high-style methods
and down-home recipes, Lonestar boasts a buffet chock full of
vegetables, pork hash, fried chicken, chopped pork, and what
has become his signature dish—tomato pie. The Lonestar
atmosphere is something everyone can enjoy. A complex of
four historic buildings, there is plenty of room to stretch out
and enjoy the live bluegrass and country music that is a regular
part of the Lonestar experience. Pearl Hampton is an integral
part of the Lonestar cooking tradition and her fried chicken is
one of the mainstays on the menu. Williams also does catering
throughout the region.

MISTER HAWG BAR-B-QUE
352 Hungry Hollow Road, Winnsboro, SC 29180
803.635.5197
Hours: Last Saturday of the month; weekend prior to July 4.
Take Out Only.
With humble beginnings in the backyard of the family
homeplace, brothers Marion and Davis Robinson helped their
father and grandfather cook barbecue and hash for neighbors
on July 4th and other special celebratory occasions. Their
barbecue became so popular they decided to open a restaurant.
Within a few years they were overwhelmed by the demand for
their barbecue and decided to scale down a bit. They built a
cook house in their backyard and now cook hundreds of
gallons of beef hash, slabs of ribs, whole chickens, and pounds
of mustard-based pork the last weekend of every month. They
prefer Boston Butts and if you time your visit right you might
land some liver pudding as well. The hash is cooked in
beautiful cast iron kettles and the pork, chicken, and ribs are
slow-cooked in wood-fired pits. If you’re looking for
traditional Midlands mustard-based pulled pork barbecue, this
is your place.

BELL’S SOUTHERN PRIDE BAR-B-Q
2508 Augusta Highway, Lexington, SC 29072
803.356.8284
Hours: Thursday thru Saturday 11:00 a.m. - 7:00 p.m.
Take Out Only.
Opened three years ago by Lexington County natives Tom
and Gloria Shealy. A veteran of the barbecue cook-off circuit,
Tom figured a restaurant was the next logical step and a way to
supplement the family income. Way back in the early 1900s,
Gloria’s grandfather ran a gas station that still stands on the
property and her father was a peach farmer who managed a
peach stand at the location through the 1960s. The menu
features a variety of family favorites—pulled pork, chicken,
ribs, and beef brisket. Barbecue is served in three different
varieties—mustard, vinegar-pepper, and tomato. All the sides
are family recipes and include seasoned baked beans, potato
salad, coleslaw, mac & cheese, and green beans. They serve a
mustard-based pork hash that sits nicely on top of your rice—
only the stock soaks through. Their dry-rub ribs and chicken
are not heavily sauced and the meat falls off the bone. Tom
and Gloria are known by the locals for their chicken salad, a
real treat for those looking for some lighter fare. The food is
served from the menu, not buffet-style, and the helpings are
more than enough for any healthy appetite.

URBAN SMOKEHOUSE BARBEQUE
3009 South Church Street Extension, Spartanburg, SC 29306
864.582.9590
Hours: Thursday thru Saturday 11:00 a.m. - 8:00 p.m.
Owner Jimmy Manning serves up hickory-smoked pork,
chicken, and ribs in the metropolitan environs of Spartanburg.
He handles all of the smoking, his wife prepares the desserts
and the coleslaw, and his sister-in-law focuses on the chicken
and baked beans. Manning smokes his meat with no sauce,
allowing the customer to sauce the meat with one of three
sauces—sweet mustard and two red “House” sauces (mild &
hot). The ribs are smoked with a dry rub, served with house

Circle M pulled pork
sauce. The meat is likely to fall off the bone on its way to your mouth. As with many upstate barbecue restaurants, you'll find no hash, but you can get a bowl of Brunswick Stew. Well worth the short drive from I-26 if you're aching for some slow-cooked pork ribs, genuine hospitality, and the smell of hickory wood.

CIRCLE M BBQ
345 Martin Sausage Road, Liberty, SC 29657
864.375.9133
Hours: Thursday and Friday 4:30 p.m. - 9:00 p.m.;
Saturday 11:30 a.m. - 9:00 p.m.
An Anderson County native, Marion Martin has been cooking hogs in some form or fashion since the late 1970s. His grandfather operated a diary farm through the early 1950s and his father turned that success into a sausage operation through 1993. As a kid, Marion became familiar with all aspects of hog butchering, knowledge he still utilizes as he prepares whole hog barbecue today. He features ribs, chicken, hand-pulled pork in a vinegar-pepper sauce, and sides that include baked beans, vinegar coleslaw, and his wife's Brunswick Stew. Don't expect to serve yourself from a buffet—Martin takes pride is serving his ribs and chicken right off the pit. Circle M is one of the few restaurants in the state that features whole-hog barbecue and Martin is a devotee of the wood-fired pit.

ALSO WORTH A TRIP
B & D Barbecue—Smoaks
Big T Bar-B-Q—Gadsden & Columbia
Carolina Bar-B-Que—New Ellenton
Freeman's Bar-B-Que—Beech Island
Hite's Bar-B-Que—Batesburg
Jack O'Dell's Midway BBQ—Buffalo
Sweatman's Bar-B-Que—Holly Hill
Trenton Bar-B-Q—Trenton

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