

The Great Carolina Barbecue Tour

By Dan Gill, Ethno-Gastronomist

"The only business here is raising of hogs, which is managed with the least of trouble and affords the diet they are most fond of. The truth of it is, the inhabitants of North Carolina devour so much of the swine's flesh that it fills them full of gross humors."

William Byrd, History of the Dividing Line
Observations made during the survey of 1728



Armed with a borrowed Tom-Tom, I loaded my motorcycle on the back of our fifth-wheel trailer and set off to discover and evaluate the essence of traditional Carolina barbecue.



My first stop was at Allen and Son in Chapel Hill, in the transition zone between Eastern and Piedmont-style barbecue. Keith Allen cooks shoulders and dresses the chopped meat with a light vinegar sauce. The tea was sweet and so were the hush puppies.

The plan was to visit only the “Best of the Best” log-burners, spend a week in the Great Smoky Mountains and ride the “Tail of the Dragon”. It was too wet and cold in late March to ride the Dragon, so I now have an excuse for a fall trip.



B's in Greenville switched to charcoal about twenty years ago, but the Eastern-style whole hog barbecue is still outstanding. The lines are long and B's closes when they run out – usually around 1:00.



Even more rustic than B's, Scott's in Hemmingway, SC is only open on Thursday, Friday and Saturday. They mop their whole hogs with a peppery vinegar sauce so that it is seasoned when it comes off of the pits. There is only one table and three chairs inside and no iced tea – only soft drinks. The barbecue was excellent, though decidedly spicier than Eastern North Carolina fare.

There are thousands of barbecue joints scattered throughout North and South Carolina, each with its' own personality. Most now cook with gas, electricity or charcoal, but there are still a few old-school pit-masters around who cook pigs as they have been cooked here for hundreds of years; over live coals obtained by burning hardwood logs down to glowing embers and spreading the coals lightly under the meat so that it cooks slowly and acquires a delicate taste not obtainable with other sources of heat. Burning wood to coals and then cooking barbecue, without having a pit fire, requires a special degree of skill, dedication, attention and a whole lot of wood.



Woodpile at the Skylight Inn in Ayden. Most log-burners use a combination of hickory, oak and pecan.



Wilber's in Goldsboro is always good and the only place that I visited that burned an open fire outside – year round.



The burn-barrels at Scott's in South Carolina are old oil tanks and the grates are truck axels. The piles of wood are mostly oak hickory and pecan. The Scotts offer to remove and cut up trees in exchange for the wood.



Here hot coals are spread under the meat at Lexington Barbecue. Often the heat is kicked up at the end of cooking and the skin is blistered and crisped. The crunchy pork skin at Lexington Barbecue was one of the highlights of my trip.

Regardless of the source of heat, barbecue happens when pork is slowly cooked beyond the well done roasted pork stage and connective tissues dissolve into gelatin. The meat “slumps” under its' own weight, loses the “roasted pork” flavor and acquires the richness, tenderness and juiciness associated with properly cooked barbecue.

When wood is burned to coals, most of the harsh volatiles that produce smoke are burned off, leaving only heat, a thin blue smoke and a very subtle hint of wood flavor. When pork is

cooked over live coals, much of the fat is rendered and vaporizes as it drips onto the hot surfaces, producing the characteristic richness of flavor that makes this form of cooking unique. Visitors from other parts of the country are often disappointed when they encounter pit-cooked barbecue for the first time: They expect barbecue to taste smoky and spicy, but the flavor of un-sauced, pit-cooked barbecue is delicate and mild. The meat is usually not seasoned while it is being cooked, except for an initial sprinkling of salt by some pit-masters. Usually barbecue is lightly sauced after it is pulled from the bones and chopped, and most people add more sauce at the table. At least in North Carolina, the sauces, though they may be spicy, are not assertive. Vinegar and very light proportions of ketchup complement pork and does not cover the taste of good barbecue. At Little Richards, barbecue can be ordered in chunks, as shown below. Served without sauce, the chunks were tender and so succulent that they oozed flavor naturally. Sauces heavy in ketchup and mustard can overwhelm the delicate flavors of good barbecue, but *do* cover a lot of sins if it is not so good.

Piedmont-style barbecue traditions, (shoulders cooked over live coals and seasoned with a light red vinegar sauce or “dip”) were influenced by German settlers as they moved down the valleys from Pennsylvania. In German culture, the shoulder is held in high regard for cooking – possibly because hams and bacon are more highly valued when cured and the rest is ground for sausage or made into scrapple and souse. Eventually tomatoes and then ketchup crept in to the mix.



Shoulders and turkey breasts on the pit at Lexington Barbecue. Note the cardboard used to prevent ashes from falling on the meat.



Though not in Lexington, Little Richards in Winston Salem serves Lexington-style barbecue done right and the best hushpuppies of the trip.

Lexington, North Carolina is the heart of Piedmont or Lexington-style barbecue. There are upwards of 100 barbecue restaurants in the area, certainly the highest concentration per capita of anywhere in the world. It all started back in the '30s when Warner Stamey learned to cook pork from the old masters, tweaked the methods to his liking and moved his operation indoors with brick pits and seating. Warner was either related to, worked with or trained practically all of the great pit-masters in the area, including Wayne Monk, owner of Lexington Barbecue. Warner subsequently moved his operation to Greensboro. Stamey's Barbecue restaurants (also outstanding, but not on the tour as I have eaten there many times) remain in the family and are now operated by Warner's grandson, Chip.

In the eastern portions of the state, barbecue traditions evolved on plantations and moved to church gatherings and social and political events. Long, narrow trenches were dug in the

ground and filled with wood that was then burned to coals. Whole hogs, split down the middle, were laid on green sticks placed across the pits and slowly cooked for the better part of a day.

The Skylight Inn in Ayden was the only disappointment of my adventure, possibly because it has been so highly rated over the years. They chop the crispy skins into the barbecue for additional flavor, but the skins soon get soggy and chewy. The cornbread was thin, dense and cool and there was no butter available to make it palatable. I may have come on a bad day, but Skylight was the least friendly and personable stop of the entire trip.



At Wilber's, pigs are laid out on the pit in late afternoon then cooked overnight. This pit arrangement with the iron bars supporting the meat is reminiscent of the old dug pits.



Sweatman's in Holly Hill, South Carolina, is an old, rambling plantation house with a large pit house out back. They serve buffet-style and fill take-out orders, but are only open on Fridays and Saturdays.

In South Carolina, barbecue traditions evolved similarly to those in North Carolina with whole hogs and vinegar-based sauces on the coast and pig parts with varying amounts of ketchup to the west. In between is a phenomenon known as the mustard belt characterized by whole hog and mustard sauce. At Sweatman's, whole hog barbecue is separated into light and dark meat and doused with a vinegary mustard sauce. They also remove the ribs and cook them separately. Here you will find another South Carolina specialty - barbecue hash.

When I returned from three weeks of evaluating traditional barbecue methods, my customers wanted to know if I was going to change anything at the store as a result. The short answer is no – I think we do a really good job of making barbecue, even though it is “Something Different”: We cook dry-rubbed pork butts overnight on electric pits designed to emulate live coals; The pits are hooked up to a wood stove so that I can control the quantity and quality of smoke from wild cherry wood; and we lightly sauce the barbecue with a combination of Eastern and Piedmont-style sauces. The result is a barbecue that has more inherent flavor cooked in.