



# ON THE TRAIL OF TRUE 'CUE

North Carolina has not one, but two distinct styles of barbecue. And while traditional pitmasters are united in their passion for cooking over wood, the sauce is a matter of hot debate

WORDS: TOM BURSON. PHOTOGRAPHS: JOHN DAVIDSON



# “THIS IS SOUTHERN LIVIN’”

honours the dwindling number of restaurants serving meat cooked over wood or wood coals, be it in a brick pit, brick smokehouse, cast-iron smoker or an old-fashioned, wood-fired oven. According to the pair, there are only about 50 or 60 barbecue restaurants in North Carolina still cooking with wood, including Melvin and his team.

Our food arrives, and immediately I can tell I've ordered too much. "This right here is what my ancestors ate," says Melvin, explaining that his restaurant is an homage to African-American culture in the South. "Our people didn't have the means to go out and buy bacon or pork chops," he adds. "We ate a lot of scraps and carcasses, and we were able to take them and salvage them to feed our families."

In fact, eastern-style barbecue is very similar to the food brought to the South in the 1800s by people from the Caribbean, including slaves. "They were cooking hogs in lemon juice, lime juice, salt and hot peppers," John tells me. "Substitute vinegar for lime juice and that's eastern North Carolina sauce."

I bite into a sandwich and it has a distinct note of vinegar. It's subtle — just enough to flavour the pork, complementing its fattiness, without masking the hickory. The collard greens, which have been braised with smoked ham hock, are slick with lard, but the richness mellows some of the bitterness of the leaves. The hushpuppies (deep-fried balls of cornmeal batter) are fluffy and sweet, with a strong corn flavour.

As we eat, Dan tells me a typical North Carolina barbecue joint is "sit-down, not fancy, good food, almost never alcohol and closes by 8pm" — although, he adds, many of the hottest spots run out of food well before then. As for how to identify an authentic spot, Dan tells me to look for "smoke and a woodpile". "But some places will fool you," warns John. Apparently, such restaurants will put a woodpile out front to lure customers, even if the wood isn't actually used for cooking. Generally, the shabbier the place looks, the better the food and, according to John, "Usually, if the sheriff or deputy's there, there's

says Melvin Simmons, sprawling out in a booth at his restaurant in Durham, North Carolina. He's helmed Backyard BBQ Pit for over 16 years, serving up barbecue sandwiches, ribs, oxtails, smoked chicken, ranging in quantity from a single serving to a few pounds to take home — because in North Carolina the question isn't just what you want to eat, but how much.

It's a little after noon, and hungry customers are already queueing out the door. This restaurant is legendary, and Melvin is one of the state's few remaining pitmasters serving up old-school, wood-cooked barbecue. In the US, barbecue varieties are what fine wines, beers and cheeses are to Europe. Each region has its own style: in Texas, they love their brisket; ribs in Memphis; in Kansas City it's thick, syrupy sauces. North Carolina, meanwhile, is hog country, where 'barbecue' specifically refers to chopped pork. In the eastern half of the state, it's all about whole hog chopped and mixed with a vinegar-based chilli sauce, while to the west, Lexington-style is pork shoulder, chopped with a vinegar- and ketchup-based sauce. Durham, where we are, straddles the line separating the two barbecue rivals.

Joining me at Backyard is John Shelton Reed, professor emeritus of sociology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. As well as being a preeminent sociologist, he's a barbecue scholar who's sampled practically every joint in the state. Alongside him is John's partner in pork, writer Dan Levine. Together the two have spent more than a decade championing their state-wide Campaign for Real Barbecue, or 'true 'cue', as they call it. Their initiative

Clockwise from top: server at the counter of Backyard BBQ Pit; wood pile at The Skylight Inn; barbecue pork ribs at Backyard BBQ Pit

Previous page: spread of dishes at Picnic, including Brunswick stew, mac 'n' cheese, devilled eggs, brisket, fried okra, hushpuppies, fried green tomatoes, collard greens, pickles and 'whole hog' barbecue



good barbecue.” Above all, they recommend avoiding ‘gassers’ — establishments cooking with propane.

My barbecue odyssey began in the city of Lexington, a two-hour drive west of Raleigh, the state capital. The journey here had taken me down a highway flanked by clusters of pines, billboards advertising barbecue, fireworks and — controversially — guns, and fast-food chains serving ‘chicken biscuits’ (fried chicken sandwiched inside a buttery, flaky scone, in innumerable iterations). There were also derelict furniture warehouses — reminders of why the town of High Point came to be known as the ‘Furniture Capital of the World’ around a century ago.

While its reputation as a manufacturer of tables, beds and wardrobes may have declined, this area has been kept on the map by its famously ketchupy barbecue, served at establishments such as Barbecue Center, Lexington Barbecue, Stamey’s and Smokey Joe. Lured in by the plume of smoke emanating from Barbecue Center, I’d made a pit-stop for lunch. My ‘chopped barbecue tray’ was shockingly red: everything on it — the meat, slaw, hushpuppies — was coated in a spicy ketchup sauce. It added an unusual, sweet-sour flavour profile to the tender pork shoulder, smoked by second-generation pitmaster-owner Cecil Conrad for nearly nine hours, while a pot of cayenne-laced dip packed some extra punch. Soon, though, stomach full, it was time to head back to Durham to continue my barbecue odyssey.

### Breaking with tradition

While Backyard BBQ Pit is an established classic, a new wave of barbecue joints is shaking things up. These modern restaurants are a contentious addition to the scene, eschewing some of the core tenets of traditional North Carolina barbecue. Some serve beer, cocktails and wine. Some also cook beef or experiment with, say, Thai or

Vietnamese flavours, and a plate may cost \$20 (£16) instead of \$5 (£4). Yet, Picnic — one of Durham’s new-wave spots — has the seal of approval from John and Dan, who tell me chefs Wyatt Dickson and Chris Holloway “are doing things the right way”. They use the old-school cooking method (smoking whole hogs for hours in wood-fired, cast-iron smokers), but the side dishes include the unorthodox as well as the traditional: “from haute cuisine to collard greens”, as chef Chris describes it. On the menu there’s a conventional barbecue sandwich, but also ossobuco-style braised pork shank. It’s the latter type of dish that riles the purists, but Chris doesn’t mind. “You’re always going to battle against the first time someone tried barbecue,” he says, hinting at the nostalgia that keeps many diners yearning for the traditional. “You’re always up against the first time it hits their mouth.”

I order a sample platter, which includes pork, coleslaw, mac and cheese, pimento cheese, devilled eggs and Brunswick stew (a tomato-based meat-and-veg dish that’s popular throughout the South), paired with an IPA created by Picnic in collaboration with a local craft brewery. It’s a hearty meal, that’s for sure, but it doesn’t feel too much for the 30C heat. The standout element is the ‘picked pork’ — which many outside North Carolina might call pulled pork. Not Chris, though. “Pulled pork is something Yankees [people from the northern US] put in a crock-pot,” he jokes. Pulled or picked, the meat glistens with fat but tastes surprisingly lean and clean, with a light, subtle smokiness achieved from cooking over oak, rather than the more distinctive-tasting hickory. The house vinegar sauce — called The Great Carolina Compromise — aims to appeal to palates from both sides of the state: a punch-packing chilli and vinegar flavour for the east, with a light touch of tomato as a nod to the west.

After Picnic, I hit the road and soak up the US in all its patriotic glory — American flags

## ESSENTIAL SIDES

### Hushpuppies

These deep-fried balls of cornmeal batter can be crunchy or airy, sweet or savoury — and no two are alike. They’re best eaten slathered in barbecue sauce.

### Collard greens

A bitter, leafy green when eaten raw, collards are best braised with smoked bacon or ham hock and served with a little salt, pepper and cider vinegar.

### Banana pudding

Arguably the dessert of the South, banana pudding is like a US take on an English trifle, made with bananas, vanilla wafers, vanilla pudding and whipped cream or meringue.

### Sweet potato pie

North Carolina is the largest producer of sweet potatoes in the US, and this dessert combines the mashed tubers with molasses. Mixed with spices such as nutmeg, ginger and cloves, they’re piled into a pastry case and baked.

### Sweet tea

Or simply ‘tea’. This iced drink is a classic accompaniment to North Carolina barbecue, offsetting the vinegar base of the sauce. A typical recipe for a pitcher calls for six tea bags, water and two heaped cups of sugar.



Picnic’s pitmaster Chris Holloway removes two whole hogs from the pit

Above: High Rock Lake, just south of Lexington



Eric Kimbrell and Alfred Sexton take a break from the pit at BBQ Center

on every house, oversized Ford F-150 pickup trucks, churches of all kinds. During one 40-mile stretch, I count 27 of them — Methodist, Presbyterian, American Baptist, Southern Baptist, Full Gospel Baptist — as the country songs fade in and out on the radio. Between Raleigh and Greenville, Route 70 is essentially North Carolina's barbecue highway, where you're rarely more than 15 miles from some of the best barbecue in the state.

I reach Skylight Inn, a short drive off the 70, a little after noon, and the car park is already a traffic jam. Within seconds, I spot a police officer picking up an order and recall John's note that popularity with law enforcement is a sign of a quality barbecue spot. Out back, piles of oak and hickory span the length of a football pitch, while by the front door a chalkboard menu reads, 'Feed the family': for \$28, you get 1.24lb of pork, two sides and a platter of cornbread.

Skylight Inn is perhaps the best-known restaurant in all of North Carolina, thanks in part to the food, but also due to the little dome on its roof: a replica of the US Capitol Building. I keep it simple, with a sandwich, and head to the dining area, where patrons are wolfing down their food before rushing back to the counter for more. What sets the pork here apart from what's on offer at most other places is the crispy bits of skin, which are chopped up into the meat for added texture. Unlike the sandwiches elsewhere, these ones crunch.

"I've been coming here every month for the past 60 years," says my tablemate, a local man called Amos. We talk about North Carolina,

agriculture and, of course, food. "I come here for the meat and Bum's Barbecue for the sides," he says, and then asks if I've tried B's — another local institution. I haven't. "Well, ya better get there early," he warns. And so that's exactly where I set off to at 7.30am the next day.

A shack covered in chipped paint, with nothing more to it than an order window, B's Barbecue could easily be described as an eyesore if it weren't for the crowd. When I arrive at 8.30am, there are already a dozen people in the queue. At 9am, B's opens, and by 11am, the food has run out. Once you try B's, you become an eastern-style convert, explains one customer. He's been coming here every Saturday for years. Another person drives six hours from Delaware each month. I hear stories of families buying 60lb of meat for the holidays. The lore grows with the queue. I pick up a sandwich, slaw, cornbread sticks and a sweet tea — all for just \$5 (£4). The pork is tender, the sauce alive with cayenne, and the iced tea so sugary it would crystallise in the sun.

### Keeping the flame alive

Fifty miles away, in the town of Dudley, Grady's Barbecue has its own devotees. And that's no surprise, as the restaurant ticks all the boxes: smokehouse out back, piles of wood out front, and a sign on the door that reads, 'Warning, you are about to eat the world's best barbecue'.

Aged 78 and 87 respectively, Gerri and Steve Grady aren't sure exactly how long they've been married, but they do know they've been running this place for the past 37 years.



### Barbecue Center's pulled pork shoulder

This dish requires a meat smoker. It's served with sweet, tangy Lexington-style barbecue sauce.

**SERVES: 6-8** **TAKES: 8-10 HRS**

#### INGREDIENTS

3kg bone-in pork shoulder  
plenty of salt, for coating

#### FOR THE SAUCE

350ml apple cider vinegar  
10 tbsp ketchup  
1 tbsp sugar  
½ tsp cayenne pepper, plus extra to taste

#### METHOD

- 1 Prepare your smoker with hickory and oakwood chips and heat to 165-170C. The fire should burn down to the coals, not ash, during cooking.
- 2 Rub the pork all over with salt, coating evenly. Place it on the grill, then cover and let it smoke for 8-10 hrs.
- 3 Meanwhile, make the sauce. Add the ingredients to a saucepan with 120ml water and 1 tsp black pepper (for extra spice add more cayenne or pepper). Place over medium-high heat and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to low and simmer for 20 mins, stirring frequently. The sauce should be smooth and runny. Remove from heat and set aside.
- 4 When the pork's ready, remove from the smoker and let it rest for 5-10 mins. Hand-pull, chop or slice the pork and toss with the sauce. How much sauce you use is up to you — you can serve any remaining sauce on the side for dipping.



The delineation of duties is simple: Steve cooks the hogs, while Gerri manages the sides, and just about everything else. I walk round the back with Steve, who can't remember how long ago he started cooking like this, but he follows his grandpa's methods, noting the only difference is he doesn't dig a hole in the ground for a pit, but rather uses bricks. Meanwhile, in the kitchen, Gerri's creations come to life — potato salad, slaw, butter beans, black-eyed peas, greens. I ask how she manages all this, considering her age. "It's hard work, but I'm a toughie," she says, flexing her slim biceps.

I order everything: pork, butter beans, black-eyed peas, fried chicken, sweet potato pie and banana pudding. And it's all wonderful. The fried chicken crunches perfectly. The pork comes with crispy skin and a spicier-than-usual sauce. Halfway through my meal, Gerri sidles up next to me and whispers, "We only serve the barbecue turkey on Saturdays," slipping me a container of the day's special. I'm lucky it's Saturday; I've never had turkey like this — almost pâté-like, unbelievably moist, seasoned seemingly with only pepper and hickory smoke. It's gone as suddenly as it arrived. I thank her for the meal and ask if she's looking to adopt.

By the end of my road trip, I've visited a total of 10 barbecue joints, where I've had eight sandwiches, seven trays, about a gallon

of sweet tea, and innumerable servings of hushuppies, collards and cornbread. I've seen so many overcrowded restaurants, I'm surprised John and Dan still consider the tradition endangered. "Places are closing," Dan had told me. "It's a generational thing. The next generation just doesn't want to do it."

That was the case for Dan and John's favourite restaurant, Allen & Son Barbecue, in Chapel Hill, which closed back in 2018. And none of the Grady's children are keen to take over their business, so the couple expect they'll close up shop when they no longer have the energy to run it. Meanwhile, at Barbecue Center, Cecil's children — both university students — aren't showing much interest, either. On top of the generational issue, there's the lifestyle. "You live barbecue," Cecil had told me. Waking up at 3am to chop wood and start the fire, dealing with the pressures of environmental health inspectors, and putting in back-breaking, 12-hour shifts at the 60C barbecue pit. Yet, a precious few chefs — such as Wyatt Dickson and Chris Holloway — are carrying the torch into the future.

For many born here, barbecue symbolises home. It embodies a culture that dates back to before North Carolina was even a state. It represents agriculture, politics, religion, family gatherings. You can get a hamburger anywhere in the world, but true chopped-pork barbecue? That's only in North Carolina. □

From left: eastern-style pork with chicken, hushuppies, black-eyed peas and potato salad at Grady's Barbecue; Gerri and Steve Grady outside the restaurant they've run for 37 years

## ESSENTIALS

### GETTING THERE

American Airlines flies from Heathrow to Raleigh-Durham. Air France-KLM and Delta fly with one stop from airports including Manchester and Birmingham.

### WHERE TO STAY

Holiday Inn Express & Suites Lexington NW — The Vineyard has doubles from \$106 (£86) a night, B&B. [ihg.com](http://ihg.com)

### HOW TO DO IT

America As You Like It offers seven nights in North Carolina from £1,410pp. Includes flights, car hire and room-only accommodation. [americaasyoulikeit.com](http://americaasyoulikeit.com)

### MORE INFO

[visitnc.com](http://visitnc.com)