

BARBECUE: A SOUTHERN CULTURAL ICON

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
The History of Barbecue	3
Barbecue By Region	10
Barbecue and Southern Foodways	15
Barbecue: A Southern Icon	20
Conclusion	28
Bibliography	30

NOTE

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Barbecue: An Introduction

Barbecue is a humble foodstuff that has somehow attained the status of a "Southern cultural icon." This project will explore the nature and history of barbecue in the Southern United States, and analyze the reasons why a type of slow-cooked pork is emblematic of what makes the South distinctively Southern. Barbecue, along with its history, rites and rituals, is a symbol of all that is right in the South. A respect for tradition, the value of a job done carefully and well, the variety of styles in the South that are all distinctively "Southern," and a history of interracial and inter-class mingling and festival are those qualities which make the South as a region something worth guarding and preserving. Barbecue is emblematic of all of these traits. Barbecue means recipes passed down through generations, the craftsmanship and skill of the "pit men" who prepare the meat, a tradition of celebration regardless of race or class, and the cherished foodways of the South. In examining barbecue, I am attempting to examine the best qualities of being Southern in America.

This project is divided into four main segments of text. The sections on the History of Barbecue and Barbecue By Region are descriptive in scope. These first two sections place barbecue in the larger perspective of Southern history and geography. Next, I examine the nature

of Southern foodways with particular respect to barbecue. This section explains why barbecue is an important food in the South, and why barbecue has taken hold in the Southern United States and not (to a significant degree) anywhere else. In *Barbecue: A Southern Icon*, the concept of barbecue as a quintessential Southern icon is examined. Its place in the collective consciousness of the South, as manifested in mores, literature, and music, is analyzed.

After you have read all of this analysis of barbecue as a phenomenon, you will probably crave some authentic Southern barbecue. The archive of menus and recipes provides some signposts for buying or purchasing some good barbecue, and the bibliography contains some scholarly works as well as books which profile great barbecue restaurants.

The History of Barbecue

The roads of the Southern United States are lined with a succession of grinning pigs, advertising the availability of barbecue in countless restaurants. The origins of barbecue in the South, however, are traceable to a period long before the smiling pig became a fixture on Southern roadsides. The etymology of the term is vague, but the most plausible theory states that the word "barbecue" is a derivative of the West Indian term "barbacoa," which denotes a method of slow-cooking meat over hot coals. **Bon Appetit** magazine blithely informs its readers that the word comes from an extinct tribe in Guyana who enjoyed "cheerfully spitroasting captured enemies." The Oxford English Dictionary traces the word back to Haiti, and others claim (somewhat implausibly) that "barbecue" actually comes from the French phrase "barbe a queue," meaning "from head to tail." Proponents of this theory point to the whole-hog cooking method espoused by some barbecue chefs. **Tar Heel** magazine posits that the word "barbecue" comes from a nineteenth century advertisement for a combination whiskey **bar, beer** hall, pool establishment and purveyor of roast **pig**, known as the **BAR-BEER-CUE-PIG** (Bass 313). The most convincing explanation is that the method of roasting meat over powdery coals was picked up from indigenous peoples in the colonial period, and that "barbacoa" became "barbecue"

in the lexicon of early settlers.

Barbecue Before the Civil War

The history of barbecue itself, aside from its murky etymological origins, is more clear. For several reasons, the pig became an omnipresent food staple in the South. Pigs were a low-maintenance and convenient food source for Southerners. In the pre-Civil War period, Southerners ate, on average, five pounds of pork for every one pound of beef (Gray 27). Pigs could be put out to root in the forest and caught when food supply became low. These semi-wild pigs were tougher and stringier than modern hogs, but were a convenient and popular food source. Every part of the pig was utilized-- the meat was either eaten immediately or cured for later consumption, and the ears, organs and other parts were transformed into edible delicacies. Pig slaughtering became a time for celebration, and the neighborhood would be invited to share in the largesse. The traditional Southern barbecue grew out of these gatherings.

William Byrd, in his eighteenth century book writing about **The Secret History of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina** has some pretty snippy things to say about some Southerners' predilection for pork. He writes that hog meat was:

the staple commodity of North Carolina . . . and with pitch and tar makes up the whole of their traffic . . . these people live so much upon swine's flesh that it don't

only incline them to the yaws, and consequently to the . . . [loss] of their noses, but makes them likewise extremely hoggish in their temper, and many of them seem to grunt rather than speak in their ordinary conversation (Taylor 21-2).

"Yaws," of course, is an infectious tropical disease closely related to syphilis. Perhaps because of natives like Byrd, Virginia is frequently considered beyond the parameters of the "barbecue belt."

At the end of the colonial period, the practice of holding neighborhood barbecues was well-established, but it was in the fifty years before the Civil War that the traditions associated with large barbecues became entrenched. Plantation owners regularly held large and festive barbecues, including "pig pickin's" for slaves (Hilliard 59). In this pre-Civil War period, a groundswell of regional patriotism made pork production more and more important. Relatively little of the pork produced was exported out of the South, and hog production became a way for Southerners to create a self-sufficient food supply--Southern pork for Southern patriots (Hilliard 99). Hogs became fatter and better cared-for, and farmers began to feed them corn to plump them up before slaughter. The stringy and tough wild pigs of the colonial period became well-fed hogs. Barbecue was still only one facet of pork production, but more hogs meant more barbecues.

In the nineteenth century, barbecue was a feature at church picnics and political rallies as well as at private

parties (Egerton 150). A barbecue was a popular and relatively inexpensive way to lobby for votes, and the organizers of political rallies would provide barbecue, lemonade, and usually a bit of whiskey (Bass 307). These gatherings were also an easy way for different classes to mix. Barbecue was not a class-specific food, and large groups of people from every stratum could mix to eat, drink and listen to stump speeches. Journalist Jonathan Daniels, writing in the mid-twentieth century, maintained that "Barbecue is the dish which binds together the taste of both the people of the big house and the poorest occupants of the back end of the broken-down barn" (Bass 314). Political and church barbecues were among the first examples of this phenomenon. Church barbecues, where roasted pig supplemented the covered dishes prepared by the ladies of the congregation, were a manifestation of the traditional church picnic in many Southern communities. Church and political barbecues are still a vital tradition in many parts of the South (Gray 133- 4).

Barbecue Restaurants

At the beginning of the twentieth century, barbecue appeared in a new venue, that of the barbecue restaurant. After the South went from a rural-agricultural region to a more urban and industrial area, grocery stores provided hog meat (is it any wonder that the nation's first supermarket chain was christened Piggly Wiggly?), agricultural fairs

replaced festive hog killings, and the barbecue restaurant took over the time-consuming task of slow-cooking pork (Bass 301). Usually, these restaurants grew out of a simple barbecue pit where the owner sold barbecue to take away. Many of the pit men only opened on weekends, working (usually on a farm) during the week and tending the pit on weekends. The typical barbecue shack consisted of a bare concrete floor surrounded by a corrugated tin roof and walls (Johnson 9). Soon, stools and tables were added, and the ubiquitous pig adorned the outside of the building. Few pit men owned more than one restaurant-- the preparation of the pig required almost constant attention, and few expert pit men were willing to share the secret of their sauce preparations. The advent of the automobile gave the barbecue shack a ready-made clientele-- travellers would stop at the roadside stands for a cheap and filling meal (Johnson 6). As the twentieth century progressed, barbecue pits grew and prospered, evolving into three distinct types. According to barbecue scholar Jonathan Bass, the three kinds of barbecue restaurants are black-owned, upscale urban white, and white "joints" (more akin to honky-tonk bars). These racial denotations, however, do not mean that barbecue restaurants catered to a specific racial clientele. Good barbecue drew (and draws) barbecue fans of every color and class.

Perhaps because much of its trade consisted of take-out

orders, the barbecue restaurant was an interracial meeting place long before the forced integration of the 1950's and 1960's (Egerton 152). When these restaurants first appeared, many were owned by black Southerners, and "whites, in a strange reversal of Jim Crow traditions, made stealthy excursions for take-out orders" (Wilson 676). In the 1950's and 1960's, much of this comity was lost. Many barbecue joints became segregated by race. Barbecue has even made it into the annals of legal history, with the desegregation battles at Ollie's Barbecue in Alabama and Maurice's Piggy Park in Columbia providing often-cited case law as well as a stain on the fascinating history of barbecue. In the case **Newman v. Piggy Park Enterprises**, the court ruled that Maurice Bessinger's chain of five barbecue restaurants unlawfully discriminated against African-American patrons.

The varied history of barbecue reflects the varied history of the South. Sometimes shameful, but usually interesting, the history of barbecue can be seen an emblem of Southern history. For the past seventy-five years, the barbecue joint has flourished. Although local specialties and the time-intensive nature of barbecue preparation have insured that real barbecue (as opposed to defrosted and microwaved meat) will never be a staple at chain restaurants, barbecue has endured. Aside from its succulent taste, delicious sauces and the inimitable, smoky atmosphere of an authentic barbecue joint, barbecue has become a

Southern icon, a symbol that is cherished by Southerners. Without the racist subtext of the Stars and Bars, the anachronistic sexism of the Southern belle, or the bland ennui of a plate of grits, barbecue has become a cultural icon for Southerners, of every race, class and sex.

Barbecue By Region

Barbecue is a cherished example of the cultural heritage of the South to most Southerners, but within the region, debate as to the nature of barbecue rages on. While barbecue-loving Southerners agree that the "Northern" definition of barbecue-- a cook-out in the back-yard-- is ludicrous, barbecue aficionados also like to argue about what constitutes true Southern barbecue. State by state, and even town by town, no method is exactly alike. For the purposes of this paper, the one non-debatable component of barbecue is pork, and the South is bounded by the parameters of the "barbecue belt" (see map). With apologies to the dedicated barbecue chefs of Owensboro and southwestern Texas, Kentucky's misbegotten notion of mutton, and the beef and mesquite of Texas simply do not qualify as barbecue, and these regions will not be closely examined here.

Why do the regional differences in pig-roasting merit attention? Barbecue is emblematic of a lot of things in the South-- despite intra-regional differences, barbecue is barbecue all over the Southern United States. We may argue about which kind is the **best** barbecue, but very few people assert that the different types are not part of a vital (and delicious) Southern tradition. Despite (in John Egerton's words) the Americanization of Dixie, the South has

maintained a distinct regional flavor that makes it special-- different from any other part of the United States. In tracing the differences between the different types of pork barbecue, we demonstrate one example of how, despite geographical disparities, encroaching national homogeneity, and bitter intra-regional disputes, the South continues to cherish those parts of itself which make it peculiarly Southern.

This established, our attention turns to the differences between the many types of pork barbecue. These are many and hotly contested. Differences can be gauged by comparing cooking styles, serving methods, side dishes preferred by each camp, and (most contentious of all) sauces.

Much of the variation in barbecue methodology and saucing in Southern barbecue can be explained by its geographical migrations. After originally appearing on the East Coast, barbecue began travelling West, picking up permutations along the way. Spanish colonists spread the cooking technology (Johnson 6), but the agriculture of each region added its own twist. The simple vinegar sauces of the East Coast were supplanted by the sweet tomato sauce of Memphis and the fiery red Texas swab. In western Kentucky, mutton was substituted for pork, and the cattle ranchers of Texas used barbecue techniques for slow-cooking beef (with these innovations, southwestern Texans and western

Kentuckians put themselves irrevocably outside the "barbecue belt").

There are several main regions of barbecue saucery in the South. Each region has its own secret sauces, with much intra-regional variation. This "barbecue belt" shares the same tradition of slow-cooking the meat, but diverges widely in sauces and side dishes.

Barbecue on the East Coast

In eastern North Carolina, the meat is chopped or sliced pig and the sauce is peppery vinegar. Traditional side dishes include coleslaw and hush puppies (perhaps a carry-over from the area's many seafood restaurants). These hush puppies are light and oval-shaped. The area of North Carolina west of Raleigh uses the same type of meat, but douses it in a sauce rich with vinegar and tomatoes. Western North Carolinians eat barbecue with bread and sometimes Brunswick stew, a stew made with vegetables, chicken and sometimes game.

Further south, in South Carolina and Georgia, the pig is still chopped or sliced, but it is doused in a yellow mustard-based sauce. In much of South Carolina, barbecue is served alongside light bread, coleslaw, and "hash" with rice. Hash is made of stewed organ meats. In this region, the skin of the pig is often removed and fried separately. (This delicacy should not be confused with the pre-packaged pork rinds popularized by George Bush). In Georgia,

Brunswick stew often appears.

Barbecue in the Central South

As the barbecue aficionado travels further west, pork remains the meat of choice, but it is served "pulled" rather than chopped. Pulled pork is slow-cooked, shredded by hand into succulent threads of meat, then doused with sauce. The pulled pig region, centered around Memphis, Tennessee, usually serves a sweet tomato sauce flavored with pepper and molasses. Because Memphis is a port city, the creators of barbecue sauces in this area had a larger repertoire of ingredients from which to choose. Molasses was shipped up-river, and became a popular seasoning. The popularity of the "pulled" serving method has resulted in the appearance of "pulled chicken" on several chain barbecue restaurant menus. Pulled chicken is reminiscent of the Northern concept of barbecue as backyard activity, and the purist should avoid it. Barbecue joints serving Memphis style barbecue usually serve it alongside coleslaw, cornbread, and sometimes french fries. Memphis barbecue is a term that encompasses both pulled pork and slow-cooked pork ribs. These ribs are either basted with sauce or rubbed with a mixture of tangy spices before pit cooking.

In Alabama, most sauces are also red, but a bit spicier than those served in Tennessee. Pulled and chopped pork is offered, as well as slabs of ribs. In Arkansas, the sauces vary. Because the state borders Tennessee, Texas, and

several other states, one can find a wide variety of barbecue styles and sauces in Arkansas. Side dishes can include baked beans, coleslaw, and potato chips. On the western side, Arkansas borders Texas, and beef barbecue is more prevalent.

After examining the many types of barbecue, it is easy to wonder, "why on earth is slow-cooked pig a **Southern icon?!?!?!"** Although it is different all over the South, and though it is a homely and unassuming pork product, barbecue has assumed heroic proportions in the cultural iconography of the South. One reason for this is the regional foodways endemic to the Southern United States. The pig has always been a crucial facet of the Southern diet, and a study of Southern foodways helps to explicate the importance of barbecue.

Barbecue and Southern Foodways

The pig has always been an important staple food in the South. Fatback, bacon, and lard season most traditionally prepared vegetables, and pork in some form or another appears on most Southern tables. The cultural importance of barbecue in Southern foodways, however, lies preeminently in its roots in festival and social ritual. The rites and customs which surround the preparation and consumption of barbecue today have roots in the cultural history of the South, with implications for traditional views of race relations, sex roles, and the formation of social relationships in the South. Decisions about food support political and social opportunities (Douglas 30), and the persistence of regional foodways in the South is a good way to examine the nature of the region.

Barbecue and the Persistence of Southern Foodways

The food preferences of the South have persisted from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries into the twentieth century to a remarkable degree (Hilliard 95). One historian speculates that the slow-cooking method of barbecue stems from a long tradition of general slowness in the South, (Bass 311), and maybe that is the reason that the South has been slow to abandon its traditional foodways. Other theories include the relative poverty of the South compared to the rest of the region, and a resulting reliance on

familiar (and easily and cheaply procured) foods. Slow-cooking methods can transform tough and stringy meats and vegetables into delicious meals, and canning and preserving bountiful summer foodstuffs is an economical Southern custom. Cooking with pork adds flavor without expensive seasoning. The Depression which enveloped the United States in the mid-twentieth century was nothing new for most Southerners-- poverty was a way of life for many Southerners long before it affected the rest of the country.

Another reason for the strong tradition inherent in Southern cooking is the emphasis on tradition in most aspects of Southern culture. Most Southerners are proud of their traditions-- for hospitality, for strong family ties, and for a lavishly laid table. John Egerton expresses this beautifully in the preface to his book on Southern food:

For as long as there has been a South, and people who think of themselves as Southerners, food has been central to the region's image, its personality and its character Accents and attitudes and life-styles may change, but fondness for Southern food persists; for many people it lingers in the mind and on the tongue as vividly as the tantalizing aroma of barbecue on the pit hangs in the air and penetrates to the core of thought and remembrance (2).

The specific foodways imposed on the South by a combination of geographical isolation and economic privation have continued into the twentieth century not only because of the persistence of these two factors, but because to many Southerners, these foods bespeak home, family and regional identity. Simmering vegetables for hours on the back of the

stove made sense in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries-- the stove was already lit, and the cook could tend to her many other chores without worrying about the greens and fatback (or butter beans or stewed corn or other vegetables). They would peacefully simmer at low heat, and would provide a meal (along with some biscuits or cornbread) when her other chores were finished. Today, this method is not convenient, but it persists. When **Georgia Brown's**, a restaurant specializing in Southern food in Washington D.C., started serving collard greens that were cooked quickly to retain crispness and nutrients, patrons complained. Now, the restaurant serves collards both ways. Obviously, convenience is not the main factor in food preparation in the South anymore-- memory and tradition dictate some food choices.

Barbecue and Southern Tradition

When considering barbecue, tradition is particularly important. Barbecue is not easy to prepare-- it requires hours of tending a hot smoky fire, and vigilant monitoring of the roasting meat. Few people would choose to spend their time in a covered shack, inundated with smoke (especially during the blazing summers of the South). But barbecue endures. Despite encroaching health regulations, despite inconvenience, and despite the prevalence of fast food restaurants all over the country, people still eat barbecue, and "pit men" still hone their craft.

The "pit men" who painstakingly tend the fire and smoke the meat that becomes barbecue are usually older black men, sometimes moonlighting from day jobs as farmers or agricultural workers (Zobel 61). Unlike most food preparation in the South, which is dominated by women, barbecue is a male preserve (Douglas 123). According to John Egerton's masterful treatment of **Southern Food**, "[t]he South's great barbecue tradition is in large measure a cultural gift from black men" (253). Perfecting a method first delegated to slaves, the South's great barbecue cooks are passing on a tradition with roots deep in the antebellum South. In the twentieth century, many pits are operated by black men, but the tradition has definitely been integrated. In my (white) South Carolina family, a Christmas tradition has all of the men staying up all night, tending the fire and basting the pig with a mustard-based sauce. Strictly off-limits to women, the men swap stories and drink Southern Comfort until the barbecue is done. Then, we all feast.

Barbecue is one way to cling to Southern foodways for younger Southerners. At many Southern universities, social functions often take the form of "pig pickin's." Fraternities and other social organizations provide beer and barbecue to hordes of college students. A barbecue is a trendy way to entertain members and peers.

This phenomenon is one manifestation of the tendency of Southerners to cherish those aspects of the South that defy

the traditions of the rest of the United States. When choosing a mascot for an entire region, few people would choose the hog no offense to the Arkansas Razorbacks).

Barbecue, like the recent "chic" of the redneck, embraces the humble origins of Southern foodways. In the South, there is often a tendency to glorify defeat and privation, and this is amply demonstrated in the popularity of barbecue. Pigs are smelly, slothful, and unattractive, but pigs are Southern.

Barbecue: A Southern Icon

What is a Southern Icon?

When thinking of possible candidates for the title of "Southern icon," processed pig is perhaps not the first to spring to mind. Cotton, the subject of song, fable and the famous "Maid of Cotton" beauty pageant, has long been considered "King" in the South. There are some problems with this characterization, however. Cotton is heir to an extensive legacy of the least attractive parts of Southern iconography-- racism, sexism, and brutal economic stratification. A major crop of antebellum plantations, cotton became an instrument of racial oppression. Slave labor fueled the cotton economy. After the Civil War, cotton leached the soil of needed nutrients, and became a cruel and capricious crop for struggling farmers. In the twentieth century, textile mills engendered stifling mill-towns, where King Cotton was processed by the poor and disenfranchised. The Maid of Cotton pageants perpetuated the sexist myth of the Southern belle.

Grits, another candidate for icon status, are just plain dull. Exploring the cultural legacy of the South through the examination of the homely plate of grits would be a paltry exercise. The advent of cheese grits (a Junior

League luncheon staple dating back to the 1940's) is a small blip in the otherwise stultifying history of ground hominy.

What about the pick-up truck? Redolent of the red-neck, a small (if vital) portion of Southern society. Debutante balls? Racist, sexist, and class-ist all in one. The Confederate flag? An icon to some, but laden with hateful baggage to many. The plantation house? See cotton in antebellum society.

We are left then with barbecue. Homely, delicious, universally beloved barbecue, whose very diffidence is emblematic of the South. Perfected amidst a culture of defeat and defiant tradition, barbecue is the perfect symbol of a region where heat makes everything happen that much slower. Slow cooking for slow talkers, dedicated "visitors" and those who believe that convenience is an illusory value. Barbecue is the legacy of a tradition of feast and celebration, and the idea that carefully prepared food should span the lines of race and class.

To consider the concept of barbecue as a "Southern icon," we must first define each of these terms. We have already established that, for the purposes of this project, "barbecue" is pork that has been cooked over a slow, smoky fire and then doused with one of a variety of sauces. When coming up with a definition of "the South," we can apply our first definition to a broader arena-- the South, for the purposes of this project, is bounded by the "barbecue belt,"

those areas of the Southern United States which serve and eat pork barbecue. Now, to the tricky part. What is a **Southern icon?**

Clifford Geertz defines icons this way:

Icons function to synthesize our ethos-- the tone, character and quality of our life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood, the picture we have of the way things actually are, and how the world is ordered. An Icon is an object, act, event, quality or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception.

Why Barbecue is a Southern Icon

Does barbecue function to synthesize the tone, character and quality of life in the South, and is it therefore an icon? Yes. Barbecue is a symbolic representation of many of the values and ideals of the Southern United States. It can be seen as a symbol of the ways things are in the South, and also as the way things ought to be. The fact that barbecue restaurants were integrated long before other public facilities is encouraging but also disheartening. Barbecue joints were integrated largely because they were take-out restaurants. Mingling was accomplished, but actually sitting down and eating together was still verboten. In the 1950's, many barbecue restaurants became segregated establishments. After the civil rights progress of the early 1950's, much of the South experienced a resurgence in racism, and race baiters like Birmingham's police chief "Bull" Connor became symbols of Southern racism to anyone with a television set.

The forced re- integration of barbecue restaurants was symptomatic of race relations all over the South.

The history of barbecue highlights some Southern strengths as well. Most Southerners like to eat, and they like to visit (preferably at the same time). Barbecue provides common ground. Unlike other traditional Southern foods like ham biscuits or grits casserole, barbecue is made for a crowd. You can make a plate of grits for yourself in the morning without inviting the whole neighborhood in for breakfast, but no-one roasts an entire pig for private consumption. Eating barbecue means either going to a "pig pickin'" with a lot of other people or eating at a barbecue restaurant. If it is a good barbecue joint, everyone else in town will be eating there, too. Many people say that the mark of a good barbecue restaurant is the mixture of vehicles in the parking lot. If you have at least a couple of pick-up trucks, some fancy sedans, and a police car or two for good measure, you are in the right place. Barbecue assumes sociability, and not just with people from your own class or neighborhood.

Barbecue and Southern Culture

Having established that Southerners of every status and stripe enjoy good barbecue, it is too much to assert that, to many of them, it has assumed the proportions of an icon? In exploring this question, it is useful to examine barbecue's place in the literature and mores of the region.

Barbecue saturates Southern history and literature. Southern politics has a long affinity with barbecue. For the past three hundred years, "pig pickin's" have been an intrinsic part of campaigning. George Washington attended a barbecue that lasted for several days. Scarlett O'Hara was an aficionado of barbecue-- she argues heatedly with her maid over the amount of barbecue a proper Southern belle should be seen to ingest.

In quite a different area of Southern culture, barbecue has made its mark in the purview of the blues. A blues artist going by "Barbecue Bob" recorded a rendition of "Barbecue Blues" in the 1920's. The gist of the lyrics has nothing to do with barbecue, and the word appears nowhere but the title. A clue to the connection between a blues song concerned mainly with lovin' and leavin' and the concept of barbecue can be found in the use of the term in the 1920's. According to one slang dictionary of the period, "barbecue" can also mean a very attractive woman.

In **Colorful Heritage**, a privately published book by Reverend James Donald MacKenzie, the author details "an informal history of Barbecue Presbyterian Church." Barbecue Presbyterian has nothing to do with pork, but happens to be situated on the banks of the Barbecue River in North Carolina. This fact is even more interesting when coupled with a reading of Steve Smith's article entitled "The Rhetoric of Barbeque: A Southern Rite and Ritual." Smith

asserts that barbecue merits examination as a quasi-religious undertaking:

In many ways, the Barbeque Eucharist serves as the perfect metaphor for understanding contemporary Southern society. The catechism contains a reverence for tradition and the heritage of the past, the vestiges of rural camp meetings, a chorus of regional chauvinism, a pulpit for oratory, an opportunity for community participation, appreciation for the vernacular, equality of opportunity, and subtle interracial respect The community values represented by the high priest cooks and the dedication of their congregations suggests that the rhetorical ritual of barbeque . . . may also serve to further human understanding and humanitarian values among the faithful (23).

If this characterization does not catapult barbecue to icon status, it is not for lack of trying.

Another demonstration of barbecue's status as a cultural icon is its presence in the work of Southern poets. In *The Language They Speak is Things to Eat*, a collection of poems by fifteen North Carolina poets, barbecue is a recurrent image. In the introduction to this collection, editor Michael McFee writes that the poets collected here (including Maya Angelou, James Seay, and Fred Chapell among others) use language that is "no less appetizing than barbecue, no less succulent and satisfying" (xx). James Applewhite, in "Southern Voices," asserts that

Our cleft

Palate waters for a smoke of the soul,

A pungence of pig the slaves learned

To burn in pits by the levee (55).

He voices the inchoate yearning that the aroma of

barbecue engenders for many Southerners-- the smell of history and of home. In another poem, Applewhite provides an extended paean to the cultural significance of barbecue, titling his work "Barbecue Service." This poem ends with this portrait:

The tin-roofed sheds with embers
Are smoking their blue sacrifice
Across Carolina.

Barbecue assumes the significance of history-- a craft passed down from "all the old home folks . . . who may not last another year" (49-50). It is a living legacy of friends and family.

A black poet anthologized in the same collection writes of the bittersweet heritage of Southern foodways:

If then it is in the blood of some of us
to lust after the ears the tails the snouts
the feet the maws & even the
chitlins of the filthy beast
forgive us: with these
& the greens cornbread & molasses
that transubstantiated into the bones
brain & flesh of the black household gods
who brought us through the evil
rooted in this land

we honor them
in the heritage of their strength (66).

A simpler take on the phenomenon of barbecue in the South comes from Jonathan Williams, who writes a three word poem entitled "The Anthropophagites Get Down in a Barbecue Sign on Highway NC 107 South of Hamlet:"

EAT

300 FEET

This is a good demonstration of the dual nature of barbecue in the South-- barbecue has a mystical quality in the Southern imagination, but a barbecue restaurant is also a good place to eat, especially in only 300 feet.

These are only a few examples of the way in which barbecue has become a cherished cultural icon to many Southerners. The most important reason that barbecue has attained icon status is that it is truly **ours**. Barbecue is Southern through and through-- its history, links with Southern foodways, popularity across the spectrum of the Southern United States, and recurrence in the literature and culture of the South all reinforce the fact that no-one in the United States can claim the legacy of good barbecue except for the South. The rich tradition of fellowship and culinary achievement is a distinctly Southern phenomenon, and barbecue should truly be termed a "Southern icon."

Conclusion

Barbecue is a Southern cultural icon. Bound to the long tradition of Southern history, barbecue has become more than just pit-smoked pork. Its ties to history, culture, and foodways make it one of the few aspects of life in the South that has not been significantly homogenized by the "Americanization of Dixie." Most Northerners do not understand the concept of barbecue, and are perfectly content to continue grilling hot dogs in the back yard, thank you very much. Barbecue remains a Southern phenomenon, one that can be embraced by Southerners of every race, class and political orientation. What constitutes true barbecue is another question, but arguing over barbecue beats arguing about other, more incendiary (no pun intended) topics. A rousing discussion over a plate of pulled pork makes for a healthy airing of opinions. After wending your way through this project, you should be amply equipped to argue with the most fervent barbecue aficionado. Start with the proper way to spell it

Barbecue joints are a legacy of Southern cultural history that should be cherished. Despite the growth of homogenized fast food chains, barbecue remains a supreme convenience food. It is highly unlikely that any chain will master authentic barbecue (remember the McRib?) The preparation of barbecue is time-consuming and inconvenient, but an incredibly persistent Southern foodway. Perhaps

other Southerners see barbecue as an icon, too.

Now that you know all about the history of barbecue, and why it should be termed a **Southern icon**, it is time to go eat some. Good places to look for listings of authentic barbecue restaurants are in the attached bibliography. Of particular interest are Jane and Michael Stern's **Good Food**, John Egerton's **Southern Food**, and Greg Johnson's **Real Barbecue**.

In the twentieth century South, it is important to remember those things that make us a distinctive region, without highlighting the many bleak spots of Southern history. Barbecue is the perfect way to do this. Deconstructing barbecue is not a silly academic exercise, but a way to analyze the wonderful things that make the South truly Southern.

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