

**The Slaw and  
the Slow Cooked**  
*Culture and Barbecue  
in the Mid-South*

EDITED BY JAMES R. VETETO  
AND EDWARD M. MACLIN

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## Mid-South Barbecue in the Digital Age and Sustainable Future Directions

EDWARD M. MACLIN AND JAMES R. VETETO

This final chapter echoes themes from earlier in the book—stories of locality, identity, and tradition embodied in the consumption of smoked pork barbecue. Here we argue that barbecue is not just a local experience. As a food and a practice, barbecue is inherently *social*. By social, we do not just mean that barbecue structures human relationships (although neither of us has ever met anyone who routinely makes and eats barbecue as a solo venture). Barbecue is social in that it brings together a heterogeneous association of people, technology, and materials (Latour 2005). Of course, this has always been the case. Even when barbecue was restricted to farmers or hunters smoking meat for immediate family and friends there was a network at play—one involving wood, meat, butchering tools, indirect heating technology, the cooks, and the lucky eaters. In such an assemblage, the technologies used have a profound effect on both the structure of the event and the experience of those present. Increasingly, these networks of people, technology, and materials are widely distributed across both virtual and physical spaces in ways that change the barbecue experience for everyone involved. To illustrate, we offer three barbecue vignettes, followed by a look at how technology shapes experience as barbecue enters the digital age. To conclude, we will look at some promising trends toward the sustainable local production of Southern heritage barbecue.

### Craig's Barbecue, De Valls Bluff, Arkansas

On a Tuesday at high noon in June 2009, Maclin arrived in De Valls Bluff, Arkansas, to meet Vetero for lunch and discussion of the present volume. De Valls Bluff marked the approximate midpoint between Maclin's location in Tennessee and Vetero's in Arkansas, about an hour and a half drive for each of us. It is also the site of Craig's Barbecue—known for their ribs and sliced barbecue pork. Driving with the windows down along old Highway 70, the smell of wood smoke let us both know that we were close. Craig's is a small white clapboard building from the 1940s with red trim and two entrances, a legacy of the restaurant's segregated past. As Maclin pulled into the parking lot with his nine-month-old daughter, the scent of smoke and the crunch of white gravel under his tires awoke memories of his own childhood. Once inside, they found a table near the door (one of only a few in the restaurant), and when Vetero arrived the conversation turned almost immediately to barbecue—the spiciness of the sauce, sliced versus chopped pork, wet versus dry ribs—intertwined with discussion of the history of this restaurant.

Craig's is a sit-down restaurant, but not in the sense of fine linens and hors d'oeuvres. In fact, the walls of the establishment can only be described as worn and perhaps a little dirty, but not in an unsanitary way. The short menu is at the back of the room above a counter just outside of the kitchen. There is no cash register in sight, and every once in a while an African American waitress emerges from the kitchen to take orders and money, deliver food to hungry customers, or bring back change from beyond. By listening closely when the kitchen door flips open or while visiting the bathroom, one can usually hear the gentle beats and inspired singing of soul or gospel music. While we were there as many people ordered food to go as stayed to eat inside. A woman took out order at the table, rather than having us order at the counter as is common at many fast-food restaurants. And make no mistake—though the food arrived on paper plates rendered translucent by the grease, this was no fast food. Vetero quickly cautioned Maclin that, unlike in West Tennessee, when you ordered pulled pork at Craig's they served it chopped. We decided to order sandwiches and share a plate of ribs. The sliced pork was rich and smoky, if different from our beloved West Tennessee-style pulled fare, and the ribs were falling-off-the-bone tender. Maclin's daughter had some of her first barbecue at Craig's (a rib

bone) while sitting in her car seat and enjoying the sights, sounds, and smells.

What she couldn't appreciate, at her tender age, was the setting of Craig's within the cultural and ecological landscape of De Valls Bluff, Arkansas. De Valls Bluff is a small town of under one thousand people, located about an hour east of Little Rock along the White River. The area is rich in agricultural land and dark river-rich soil, and driving to town from the interstate one passes hay fields, rice farms, and small-to-medium-sized houses, many with vegetable gardens. A first impression of the population (and the clientele of Craig's) is that it is diverse but not wealthy and definitively rural. The buildings in De Valls Bluff along the highway are tinged with age, well used, giving the feeling of a community that is older and active but not undergoing major new growth. Craig's itself is an older building, and contributes to a feeling that tradition is important here. Our perceptions are not based on deep ethnographic insight—we have only been through town a few times specifically to eat at Craig's—but on observations coupled with our experiences in other such small Southern towns. Our perceptions were likely also colored by the purpose of our trip—to find good barbecue and to discuss the details of the present volume. We will return to perception, tradition, and culinary journeys momentarily.

### Charlie Vergos's Rendezvous, Memphis

A year and a half earlier, in the spring of 2008, we had co-chaired a session on Mid-South barbecue at the annual meeting of the Society for Applied Anthropology in Memphis, Tennessee. For a pair of academics, beginning a discussion of barbecue at a professional conference requires a certain amount of preparation and a larger amount ofchutzpah—especially when that session is held in the back dining room of Memphis's historic Rendezvous. Holding the session at the Rendezvous served two purposes. First, it provided an enveloping sensory experience for attendees. The setting of the restaurant drove home our points far more effectively than a PowerPoint slide ever could hope to. Second, the Rendezvous is itself a contradiction—it is perhaps the most famous Memphis barbecue landmark, steeped in local lore, but it is also an explicitly large-scale commercial venture that overshadows locality.

On the day of our session we were shown into a back room where our server, "Robert Junior," would be bringing food for the group. Robert

Junior has worked at the Rendezvous for over twenty-four years—and is the son of “Robert Senior,” another employee who has been serving ribs at the restaurant for over forty-five years. Catered group dinners at the Rendezvous begin with appetizers of smoked sausage and cheddar cheese sprinkled with a special mixture of paprika, salt, and herbs and served on paper plates. While the restaurant does serve pulled-pork barbecue, it is certainly not their most popular item. The specialty of the house is “dry rub” ribs: the rib meat is succulent, but is cooked with a dry rub rather than a wet sauce. Rendezvous ribs have legendary status as something like the Platonic ideal of dry ribs and can be ordered as a half rack or full rack. Following the presentations and discussions, one attendee remarked that it was “the most delicious conference session” he had ever attended.

The Rendezvous is located in downtown Memphis just a few blocks from the blues clubs on Beale Street. The restaurant is down a flight of stairs in an alley off Second Street, and newcomers often wonder whether they have arrived at the right location, or have found a service entrance by mistake. The restaurant opened in 1948 in the basement of Charlie Vergos’s diner. The interior is windowless with aged dark walls and furniture, throwing emphasis onto the tables with red and white checkered tablecloths. Highway and street signs across the walls convey a sense of locality—the idea that this is the center of the barbecue universe, and all other points should be measured from here. While waiting for a table (and there is often a wait) you can look through glass cases full of artifacts from Memphis of the 1940s. The Vergos family includes restaurant founder Charlie, who was a former head of the Memphis Convention and Visitors’ Bureau, and his son John, who served for eight years on the Memphis City Council. The restaurant is linked to charities and events throughout the city, including the Memphis Zoo, the Dixon Gallery and Gardens, and the Make-a-Wish Foundation. The restaurant is a favorite among locals, but also among tourists and traveling business people.

### Bozo’s Bar-B-Q, Mason, Tennessee

The town of Mason, Tennessee, is located about an hour east of Memphis along U.S. Highway 70—once a major thoroughfare before the interstate was built, now a road weaving much of rural Tennessee together in a mosaic of farmland, small towns, and speed traps. In 1923

Thomas Jefferson “Bozo” Williams opened Bozo’s Hot Pit Bar-B-Q across the street from its current location (the restaurant moved in the early 1950s). Bozo’s was owned for many years by the Williams family, and despite recent changes in ownership it remains a barbecue landmark. During the 1980s, Bozo’s was engaged in a decade-long trademark battle with Bozo the Clown. The restaurant ultimately won, but only after the case went to the U.S. Supreme Court—one of the findings being that the restaurant’s fame made it an interstate venture. Maclin’s grandparents lived near Bozo’s when he was growing up, and often found that “we live near Bozo’s” was enough to satisfy queries about the location of their rural home—more helpful than naming the town itself, since so few people had heard of Mason.

Mason itself bears some resemblance to De Valls Bluff. It is a community surrounded with agricultural land, with a population of around a thousand, and it is about an hour from the banks of the Mississippi River. Mason was a railway stop during the 1800s and early 1900s, but the bustling downtown—once busy with local markets and a thriving music scene—has deteriorated. The town’s major intersection has been dominated by the same two gas stations (or variants of them) since the 1980s. At the same time, the town’s borders have expanded to encompass new residents, and the forty-mile-an-hour speed limit signs (which only strangers ignore) have moved outward as new housing developments to the north of town have sprouted. Though many of the buildings seem old or in a state of slight disrepair, the flow of traffic through town and to the handful of shops, gas stations, and restaurants shows that Mason retains a vibrant energy.

Maclin entered Bozo’s on a March afternoon in 2008 with his new wife, along with Vereto and his parents, to offer them a taste of his favorite local barbecue. Bozo’s is a pale brick building, stained in parts by years of smoke. The parking lot is usually full near lunchtime and in the early evenings. Entering the front door, Maclin was struck by the smell—not just the scent of barbecue, but the smell of the foyer itself, which flooded his mind with childhood memories. The restaurant’s entryway and dining counter, and part of the large sign in front of the building, were featured in the 2005 film *Walk the Line* about the life of Johnny Cash. The walls are covered with a pale reddish wood paneling that, combined with the wooden chairs, Formica tabletops with metal edging, green bar stools at the serving counter, black and white tiled floor, and red and white gingham curtains, maintain the 1950s look of

the interior. The windowsills and numerous shelves are decorated with assorted statues of pigs—many standing on two legs and wearing clothing. One wall features a handful of photographs of the founder, Bozo Williams, and his family as well as the restaurant in earlier years. Two photos depict an incident in the 1950s when “the Mexicans crashed into Bozo’s” and show a car firmly embedded in the restaurant’s entrance.

Our whole entourage had pork sandwiches that day. The “white pig” is pulled white meat topped with coleslaw and served with sauce on the side. Eating in the restaurant, Maclin was reminded of his grandmother—one of the world’s slowest eaters, who prided herself on eating everything on her plate. She could clean a rib bone to the point that forensic detectives would have had trouble finding any meat, and her dinner plates probably didn’t need to be washed since she was so thorough. At Bozo’s, the Maclins always knew that they needed to pace themselves so that they would not be bored while waiting for Grandmaw to finish. Grandfather Maclin always had to make the rounds, shaking hands with other customers whom he knew from farm bureau meetings, the county commission, or church, or because they were cousins many times removed. The waitstaff knew the Maclin family by name, partly because they had eaten in the restaurant once a week or more for decades and partly because Mason just isn’t that big. With time and changes in ownership, some things have changed—you can’t get a sixteen-ounce Coke in a glass bottle anymore, and the french fries are different—but the barbecue tastes the same as Maclin remembers from growing up. The Veteo family paid it high compliment by comparing the sauce to McClard’s from Hot Springs, Arkansas, and to their own homemade sauce. When we left, it was with an agreement to come back if we were ever all together in the area again.

### Local Histories and Historic Localities

The three vignettes above show three very different restaurants in three communities, but with a few similar threads. All three restaurants rely to some extent on the history embodied in their physical space. Whether it is the basement entryway at the Rendezvous, the 1950s decor at Bozo’s, or the dual entrances at Craig’s, the restaurants are all situated firmly in time and local contingency. These restaurants have historically been rooted in their local communities. At the same time, though, each of these restaurants sits within a larger context that enables its current

(and historical) operation. While the local history of each restaurant is wrapped up in family and community, the “historic localities” of each site are more far flung.

At Bozo’s, a key factor in the U.S. Supreme Court case over the Bozo’s trademark—between Bozo’s the restaurant and Bozo the Clown—was that the restaurant was able to demonstrate that they served an interstate customer base (Margolick 1991). A similar argument was made in the case of Ollie’s Barbecue in Alabama: because Ollie’s meat came from across state lines, their business counted as interstate commerce and as such was subject to federal regulation. The resulting Supreme Court case (*Katzenbach v. McClung*) was a key decision in upholding the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Weiner 2003). In the same way, the networks of actors at play historically at Craig’s and the Rendezvous stretch across multiple levels of scale—city, state, regional, and national. In fact, given the scale of changes in population distribution, farming practices, and changes in food distribution and refrigeration technologies, change in the structure of the networks surrounding these restaurants should be properly regarded as the norm rather than a novelty.

Looking at farming practices, for example, from the 1970s onward there was a dramatic shift in hog farming away from open lots and toward contained farms modeled after modern large-scale poultry operations (Thu and Durrenberger 1998). These shifts had profound environmental, economic, and social effects within farming communities. Among these, the efficiencies of large-scale operations contributed to a drop in hog prices and a loss of jobs among independent owner-operators (Ikerd 1998). Changes in hog production also led to a shift toward lean meat that was supposedly being demanded by consumers (Thu and Durrenberger 1998). Lean meat is produced through management practices such as early weaning and age-specific feeding, as well as through genetic changes made possible in part by artificial insemination—all of which are more easily achievable under mass production (Rhodes 1995). The result of these shifts has been an increase in vertical integration, with giant firms now operating multiple hog operations, food processing plants, and retail operations (Barkema, Drabenstott, and Welch 1991). Such technological changes affect multiple actors within the barbecue complex—not least of all the pigs themselves. While changes in hog production have certainly affected the owners and operators of barbecue restaurants, these shifts have remained largely invisible to the end consumer.

### Technology and Taste

During the 1980s, the Rendezvous entered into a relationship with another Memphis-based company—Federal Express. The new service, which began as a novelty, allowed customers across the country to order food by phone and receive their ribs by next-day airmail. In 1987, the service was seeing as many as fifty to sixty orders a day (Alva 1987). By 1989, the flying ribs were bringing in \$100,000 a year (Greene 1989). Orders by phone attracted such high-profile customers as Bill Cosby and Frank Sinatra (Robbins 1988).

Charlie Vergos's Rendezvous was the first in a long line of other Memphis-based barbecue restaurants that now offer online ordering, including Corky's, Neely's, and Cozy Corner. In addition to maintaining their own websites, barbecue restaurants increasingly are embedded in new virtual communities. The Rendezvous, Bozo's, and Craig's, as well as Corky's, Neely's, Cozy Corner, and other Mid-South restaurants, now have active fan pages on social networking sites like Facebook. A recent search of the microblogging site Twitter revealed numerous posts from people—both inside and outside Memphis—enjoying Rendezvous ribs. Of the three restaurants featured at the beginning of this chapter, Craig's has perhaps the least web presence. Craig's has no official homepage, but is mentioned frequently on road-food websites and has a Facebook group with fans from Arkansas, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Missouri. All of the restaurants are also mentioned in various weblogs, such as this entry on Craig's from *BBQ Quest*:

I was driving back from vacation in the Ozarks and decided to hit this place. It is on the old Highway 70 between Memphis and Little Rock. . . .

It had rained hard for about two days here. Things inside were a bit soggy. But potential health code violations have never kept me from good BBQ. I got the dinner plate hot. You can get mild, medium, or hot. Apparently you can get extra hot too but I didn't know that until after I ate. I like a spicy BBQ as long as it isn't so hot to interfere with actually enjoying the food. The hot sauce is a thick, spicy, orange sauce that would hold up well on most any meat. I got the pork. It was tender, and thick sliced but still soft enough to chew through on a sandwich without stopping to cut it up.

. . . There were a lot of drive-up customers from out of town. One

guy was returning from Oklahoma where he had moved after growing up. The place has been around since the '40s. It's nice to see such longevity when it is earned from the consumers. (Pena 2009)

Online communities form new localities not dependent on geographic limits. These communities may allow former residents to remain in contact with the people, places, and food of their past. They may also allow new members from other regions to participate in the barbecue process—to take some claim on various local barbecues as their own. However, no change happens in isolation; the sensual appeal of the restaurant-in-context shifts along with that context. Technologically mediated changes in the experience of barbecue come in at least three varieties: context changes, shifts in perception, and transformation into spectacle.

What is the difference between a plate of ribs at a table in the back of Charlie Vergos's Rendezvous and a plate of the same ribs in an apartment in New York City? The context in which a meal is consumed includes simultaneous factors such as table settings, ambience, and side dishes, as well as nonsimultaneous factors including recent meals, time of day, and season (Cardello 1995). The context in which a plate of ribs is consumed is not trivial; it affects assessments of food quality. More than that, if external environmental factors contribute to beliefs about barbecue—about tradition, taste, and authenticity—then those factors may be considered to be part of cognition itself (Clark and Chalmers 1998). This is not to say that the flavor of barbecue-by-air is quantitatively different because the context is different, only that it will be a different experience.

Similarly, prior expectations may influence perceptions of the barbecue experience (Cardello 1995). A virtual barbecue explorer may have read multiple reviews of menu items, seen photographs, looked at maps, and talked to others in chat rooms before ever setting foot in Bozo's or Craig's. A recent search revealed conflicting opinions about Bozo's. Consider this example, from the blog of "Fred," a neurosurgeon living in Switzerland:

As a kid traveling with my parents, we always timed a trip to or from Memphis to coincide with lunch or supper [at Bozo's]. The place was always crowded, and the BBQ was wonderful.

. . . I am here to tell you that Bozo's BBQ is still going strong, has

great southern style food and hospitality, even sold me a Bozo's ball cap. Next time you are in Mason, Tennessee, drop by. (Fred 2006)

Now contrast that with the following post, from *Chowhound*:

On the advice and recommendation of a handful of travel guides, folks around town, and a soul or two on this board we ventured to Bozo's Hot Pit Barbecue last night to sample the food there. Sadly, I was a little disappointed.

The food—the side items, especially—are all uniformly good. Unfortunately, the meat that they serve falls under the category of “roast pork,” i.e. there was no smoke flavoring anywhere in the meat; no telltale pink coloring, no real depth of flavor. Likewise, the ribs appeared to have been cooked in an oven. Don't get me wrong, I'm a big fan of roast pork, and the ribs had a flavorful spice blend rubbed into them and were falling-off-the-bone tender. But I expected more from a place one friend of a friend had described as “better than any barbecue place in Memphis.” (Cooper 2002)

In fairness to Bozo's, we have both been there quite recently and found the food to be excellent, but Web pages have a tendency to linger, and preconceptions that are established online can play a large role in how a restaurant is perceived. Expectations related to food are accompanied by a host of stereotypes and essentialisms about small Southern communities. During our visit to Craig's, we brought with us not only our appetites but also years of experience in small Mid-South towns—experience that may have given us insight into De Valls Bluff or misled us, but nonetheless influenced our dining experience.

Changes in experience are not only a result of the mental states of the eater. As barbecue spreads across the Internet, changes in both the product and its packaging occur. The evocation of tradition and locality that is found in physical restaurants is made explicit within restaurant websites. The *Rendezvous* site ([www.hogsfly.com](http://www.hogsfly.com)), for example, includes a section on history as well as references to the longevity of the staff and links between the restaurant and the city at large. The new connections between people and meat forged on the Internet have the potential to reshape the barbecue landscape by allowing comparisons that might not have been made before. How do *Rendezvous* ribs compare to ribs in Kansas City? You can order some and find out. Which restaurant has the best barbecue in West Tennessee? You can print a list of candidates,

complete with satellite-generated maps pinpointing their exact location and reviews by dozens of self-proclaimed barbecue experts.

In 1999, the rights to the Bozo's trademark were bought by Isaac Tigrett (Jennings 2007). Tigrett, perhaps best known as the developer of the House of Blues and Hard Rock Cafe chains, had a new franchising idea involving Bozo's Bar-B-Q. Tigrett originated the concept, then marketed it as a just-add-cash project—for an initial investment of only \$10 million! The project website ([www.bozosbar-b-q.com](http://www.bozosbar-b-q.com)) consists of a five-minute-long presentation laying out the design. The viewer is first asked to select their region: either the U.S. market or the Mid-East/Asia market. The choice results in one of two possible presentations that appear to be almost identical, except that in the Mid-East/Asia market, all references to pigs or pork have been replaced with references to lamb, and drawings of pigs have been replaced with similar drawings of lambs. The presentation lays out a range of possibilities for a Bozo's franchise, including drive-in restaurants, large-market restaurants with stages for concerts, and even an amusement park. The theme is barbecue-meets-carnival-sideshow—with large hanging banners of a Devil Child, Alligator-Skin Girl, and Tattooed Lady. The familiar Bozo's sign is mirrored in fictional signs advertising a catfish restaurant, a concert venue, elephant rides, and the world's largest ball of string. Words flash across the screen as the Beatles' “Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band” plays: “Pig [or lamb] Power!” and “The pork [or lamb] shall rise again!” The Confederate flag is mimicked: blue diagonal crossbars on a red field are studded with white pigs (or lambs) rather than stars. The staging is pure spectacle, in which “everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation” (Debord 2002). Within this spectacle, the idea of Bozo's becomes more important than its actual physical form. If the promotion were to take hold, the spectacle of Bozo's would in fact become its reality. As of our publication date, no franchises have been opened and the original Bozo's Bar-B-Q remains untouched.

Where mass consumerism and virtual space converge, the barbecue landscape morphs into a form of hyperreality. In this space, the real-life heat of the pit is replaced with the warm glow of a computer monitor, the experience of the pimastrer is replaced with the collected wisdom of the blogosphere, and the staged images of food become the ideal to which reality must aspire. In the hyperreal world, actual reality becomes unthinkable, as local diversity is shunned for its illusory double (Eco 1990).

Luckily, reality has not given way completely to the virtual. Tech-



nology has, though, changed the way that we experience barbecue. From the raising of pigs to the prevalence of online reviews and discussion groups, and from next-day air to restaurant websites, the networks of people, materials, and technology that make up “barbecue” have shifted. This process is ongoing. The use of telephones and automobiles allowed interstate traffic to reach Bozoz’s in the 1960s, whereas in the 1920s both people and word of mouth traveled more slowly. The future of barbecue will be shaped by technological change in ways that are difficult to predict. Denver food critic Jason Sheehan has said, “I believe that barbecue drives culture, not the other way around” (Sheehan 2006). Here Sheehan has restated an old anthropological question: does culture drive behavior, or does behavior drive culture? We will not attempt to answer that question here; we will simply say that technology, barbecue, and culture will continue to influence each other and change together into the foreseeable future. Let us all hope that something of the spirit of traditional Mid-South barbecue will continue to live on despite technological and cultural change, and despite the mixed results of “progress,” for it is an institution worth preserving.

### Barbecue Futures?

We hope we have been able to demonstrate throughout the present volume, and specifically in this concluding chapter, that barbecue as a Southern food culture and institution has been undergoing the same massive changes that have enveloped most of the world over the past hundred years in a process that has usually been labeled under the catch-all term “globalization.” As we have also seen, some of the changes in the modern era have been good and some bad. While overnight barbecue arriving at the front door and virtual barbecue communities are positive developments for some, they certainly will not satisfy the yearning shared by those of us who have grown up eating at small barbecue joints characterized by the sweet smoky scent of hickory wood; the jumble of plates and cutlery clanging in the kitchen; smiling waitresses asking, “Whatta y’all have?,” sweet tea that will rot your teeth; the colorful decor of wood paneling and old signs; and the friendly faces of people from all walks of life. There is nothing like it to those who know it.

That being said, it is obvious that technocultural change has shifted the ground under our collective smoked pork, as we know it. As John Shelton Reed and Dale Volberg Reed (2008) have described for North

Carolina barbecue and Rien Ferril (Chapter 6, this volume) has for West Tennessee, the processes of modernization have made it all the more difficult for traditional barbecue restaurants to survive. Economics of scale have made quality whole hogs increasingly impossible to find. The spread of fast-food barbecue joints with electric smokers—and the backing of corporate capital—has left those few who still engage in the long, gritty process of preparing traditional barbecue in a struggle to adapt, compete, and survive. It is much the same story that anthropologists have documented among traditional cultures and processes worldwide as they face the pressures of an increasingly globalized world. It may be that we are witnessing the swan song of barbecue as we have traditionally known it, but we as anthropologists and participants in the culture of Mid-South barbecue do not necessarily think so. We will conclude this volume with a story of hope for the future of Mid-South barbecue and that of Southern barbecue in general.

Angela Knipple and Paul Knipple (Chapter 9, this volume) have argued convincingly that barbecue is appropriately conceived as a “Slow Food” as defined by the international and U.S. chapters of the Slow Food Movement. This designation has the potential for several outcomes of varying degrees of desirability for different segments of the population. One outcome, all too familiar to Slow Food circles, is that Southern barbecue will be transformed into a nouveau specialty food to be enjoyed only by the economically privileged at effete and expensive dinner gatherings. Here we are talking about things like pumpkin-plum barbecue sauce on pork garnished with cilantro and served with wine. Now, we don’t have a problem with such foods in general—and they may be extremely delicious and satisfying—but they do not meet our expectations of what Southern barbecue properly *is* (which, we admit, is a topic of much dispute even among traditionalists). For us, Southern barbecue has always been a proletariat-based food that has migrated upward to other social classes like hickory smoke billowing forth from metal stovepipes. We hope this will remain the case.

Finally, let’s cut briefly to the Georgia Piedmont for a look at another possible outcome. In the fall of 2009 Vetere attended a “Field of Greens” festival and fund-raiser for organic farmers affected by recent floods at Whippoorwill Hollow Farm, located near Conyers, Georgia, about thirty minutes out of Atlanta. Slow Food Atlanta was one of the organizers of the event. For fifteen dollars you got all the food, beer, and music you could eat, drink, and listen to. About noon, twenty or

so local restaurants put out delicious samples of food that ranged from the simple to the sublime. Some of the most notable were stone-milled grits, pulled pork, and roast duck on sourdough bread topped with local goat cheese. Veteto washed it all down with a smooth oatmeal porter brewed with rainwater collected nearby at a local restaurant and brewery.

He would have been satisfied with such fare alone, as it was far fresher, fancier, and more local than he was used to. Then around three o'clock he noticed that a crowd had started to gather on a hill near the beer taps. He clambered uphill to investigate. The crowd included a person of just about every ethnicity, social class, age group, and occupation to be found in rural Georgia. Indian software designers mingled with down-home Georgia farmers and local punk artists. Veteto joined the crowd and witnessed what he is convinced is one delectable and very real future for Southern barbecue. As chefs from three local restaurants chopped away at different tables on pork shoulders, the crowd was given the specifics of the event. It turns out that three different Southern heritage pigs raised by three local sustainable farmers had been prepared by the participating restaurants. They had brought in judges for the event and a whole lot of extra pork to share around. Each was made in a distinct manner, but all were vaguely recognizable as being along a continuum in the Georgia-Carolina style. It certainly wasn't Mid-South barbecue, but Veteto was glad for it, since he wasn't in the Mid-South.

Among the crowds, he didn't get the chance to catch up with the farmers to find out what specific breeds of heritage hogs were being used, but there are many that are still available in these contemporary times, along with others that have sadly gone extinct. The Mulefoot Hog, for example, is a critically endangered black variety. Only 150 purebred individuals remain of the breed that was once known as the highest-quality "ham hog" to roam the forests and farms of the Southern states. It was historically nicknamed "Ozark Hog" in the South and is almost certainly descended from the Spanish *presa negra* hogs that were first shipped to the Americas in the 1500s (Nabhan 2008). There is also the Guinea Hog, another black variety of pig once common to Appalachia. It was originally brought to the region by West African slaves; the African Guinea stock then picked up genes from the British Isles swine that were already there. Thomas Jefferson grew related varieties at Monticello. They were traditionally fed and fattened on mast provided by Appalachian forests, and the meat was known to be breaded in



**Locally grown pork, smoked and almost ready to pull.**  
Photo by Jessie Fly.

biscuit dough and ashes and served along with various barbecue sauces (Nabhan 2008). Another breed is the black and white Ossabaw Island Hog, which arrived on the southeast coast of America just nine years after Ponce de León's first visit to Florida in 1513. It may in fact be the most closely related, genetically, of living animals to the Iberico hogs in Spain when America was first being explored by the Spaniards. Gary Paul Nabhan describes its meat thusly: "With dark purple to rosy red pork, an intense but nuanced aroma, and a lustrous texture, the meat of the Ossabaw Island hog still arouses the same sense of pleasure that it did more than four centuries ago, when homesick Spaniards roasted it on the barrier islands off of the Georgia coast" (2008, 172).

Some may be cranky and say, "That heritage stuff ain't the barbecue I grew up with. I do just fine with my corporate hogs." That may be

the case, but heritage breeds are probably those that our grandparents grew up with and most definitely those that our great-grandparents did. And we are lucky that there are organizations and initiatives such as the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy ([www.albc-usa.org](http://www.albc-usa.org)) and Renewing America's Food Traditions ([www.albc-usa.org/RAFT/](http://www.albc-usa.org/RAFT/)) that are dedicated to conserving heritage hogs among farmers and getting them back out into the marketplace.

Others may argue that change is inevitable and good, and that barbecue is no different than other modern pursuits. It is undeniable that change is the only constant. The Southern hogs that were brought to this country by the Spanish and English and by African slaves have obviously withstood a lot of cultural and political change over the past four hundred years. Our country is no longer ruled by the Spanish or English, and it no longer practices slavery, but yet those hogs have *endured*. And so has traditional barbecue, despite the moves toward hyper-commercialization and technological solutions by an overly aggressive modern capitalist system. Perhaps it is time for some of us to put on the brakes, cherish what is good, and help bring heirloom foodstuffs back into our everyday lives and culinary traditions. That would be a big change for most of us in America, and in our opinion, a change in a positive direction. Current anthropological scholarship is much concerned with moving beyond mere critique and into potential "imaginaries." In the best of that tradition, we *imagine* that incorporating heirloom foods and sustainable farming practices back into barbecue traditions is a noteworthy direction worth exploring for the Mid-South and beyond. Indeed, as can be seen throughout this volume, it is a path that is already being explored by many daring and curious souls, and particularly among those with a taste for good Mid-South barbecue.

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