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THE CITY'S BBQ BIBLE

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One man's journey into the pit

BY LOYD MCINTOSH

When it comes to Southern culture, few things are as important to our history and mystique as barbecue. The number of restaurants and stands offering smiling neon pigs and great plumes of smoke billowing out of old brick chimneys is testament to its significance here. With over 70 places listed in the Greater Birmingham Yellow Pages, it is undeniable that this simple food has a special relationship with the people and consciousness of the city.

Throughout Birmingham it is almost impossible to walk down a street without smelling the aromas of barbecue on the pit or bumping into a down-home barbecue restaurant.

BBQ Banter



Our favorite barbecue joint holds a special place in our lives. Over the years it has served as a familiar place to meet friends and family, a place to slow down and relax in a neighborly atmosphere.

In Birmingham and throughout Alabama, barbecue crosses the line from just a dish or a way of cooking and into the tradition and folklore of the region. Just the mention of the word "barbecue" can stir up the same kind of passion and devotion usually found only on Sundays in church. For many Southerners who have grown up eating at the local barbecue restaurant, loyalties run deeper than the fertile soil of the Alabama Black Belt. Barbecue is, primarily, about tradition. For many of those who have continued the art of barbecue for a new generation, tradition is all that matters.

The following is a personal

Visitors to the Magic City have spread the word about Full Moon (formerly Pat James' Full Moon). This Southside BBQ joint has a widespread reputation for their ribs, pork butts, special sauce and chow chow relish. Founded by Pat James (once an assistant football coach under Bear Bryant at the University of Alabama), Full Moon has been in business now for 17 years. A second location is on Patton Chapel Road in Hoover; a third on Highway 280 is planned.

account of three of my favorite barbecue joints in the area that have deep roots in the area and continue to do barbecue right—Bob Sykes Barbecue in Bessemer, Jim Deerman's Barbecue in Forestdale and The Golden Rule Barbecue in Trussville.

BOB SYKES BARBECUE

One of the restauranteurs who carries on the family tradition of barbecue is Van Sykes, owner of Bob Sykes Barbecue in Bessemer. Van took over the family business in 1982 after the death of his father, the restaurant's namesake. Sykes believes his mission is to preserve his

father's recipes, which represent some 100 years of Southern tradition.

Sykes' father learned his trade on his family farm in Tennessee before opening his first restaurant in Bessemer in the 1950s. It's that sense of a personal connection to history and duty to family that has kept Sykes in the business.

"One thing that makes barbecue such a popular item in the South is (that) it's just generational," Sykes says. "It was passed from one generation to the next generation, and my father was fortunate to be around it when he was growing up and remember how it was done.

"They would dig a hole in the ground and lay some sticks across it, forming the grade. Then, they would start a fire with hickory and as it burned into coal, they would shovel it into that hole, and the coals would cook those pieces of meat that sat on

those pieces of wood. That is what we know today as barbecue."

While he doesn't exactly cook his barbecue in a hole on the Bessemer Superhighway, Sykes does consider himself to be one of only a handful of cooks in the area who resist change and stick to tradition.

I started going to Bob Sykes for lunch about once a week while working as a reporter for The Western Star in Bessemer. I had the opportunity to interview Sykes several times during my tenure in West Jefferson County and found myself going back as much for the conversations as for the food. Sykes is an engaging conversationalist and a virtual encyclopedia of barbecue, a subject he takes very seriously. Sykes is thoughtful and deliberate when it comes to the cooking process and preparation of his barbecue. He cooks his pork for eight hours over a brick barbecue pit in plain

Dreamland is legendary. Known well as a no-frills rib joint in Tuscaloosa, Dreamland—which ships ribs and sauce to fans the world over—made Birmingham smile when they opened in Southside in 1993. Rib-lovers only: don't you dare ask for a chicken sandwich.



view as you walk into the restaurant. Aside from moving the pit from the side to the front, Sykes has changed nothing about the cooking process. Like other barbecue purists, he has resisted the temptation to tamper with his father's methods.

"This cooking process was something that was born not last century but the century before. The methodology of cooking barbecue is one of those things that I just don't think a machine will ever perfect any better than the natural way to do it," Sykes says. "We don't cook anything fast. That kitchen is just like it was 40 years ago. We didn't need a microwave in 1957, and I don't need one now."

Sykes' commitment to traditional ways of cooking is so legendary among other restaurant owners, cooks and food writers that he was asked to be a charter member of the Southern Heritage Foodways Alliance, a non-profit organization based out of the University of Mississippi. The purpose of the alliance is to preserve the South's culinary heritage through education and research.

"One of our missions at Southern Foodways is to uphold those old barbecue methods," Sykes says. "Everybody wants everything faster, but some of the old Southern recipes just can't be improved upon."

"To me, barbecue needs to have a little rough edge to it. It needs to be a little more blue collar," Sykes adds, "because that's what barbecue is."

JIM DEERMAN'S

Jim Deerman's is a name that I remember growing up. My parents used to take my sister and me to the Jim Deerman's location in Roebuck when we were young kids in the 1970s. I was a picky eater as a child and rarely, if ever,



Jim 'n Nicks, opened 16 years ago by Jim Pihakis, is a Lakeview landmark, loved for great barbecue, tasty sides and generous portions. Jim 'n Nicks also has locations in Hoover, Homewood and an Highway 280 at Greystone.

actually ate a barbecue sandwich. Instead, it was a plain hamburger, sometimes with ketchup, and French fries for me. Still, I can remember the old brick building that seemed to lean crooked upon its foundation. In its place now is a used car lot, just a few hundred feet away from a brand new Johnny Ray's.

The restaurant's namesake, Jim Deerman, retired from the business back in 1982, leaving his barbecue restaurants to his son-in-law, Dave Lawrence. Lawrence trimmed the operation back to one small, homey store that looks out of place amid the four-lane hustle and endless strip-malls that make up U.S. Highway 78 in Forestdale. I had all but forgotten about Jim Deerman's before passing it en route to an assignment a couple of years ago. It has quickly become one of my favorites.

Lawrence, like many who make their living in barbecue, is very secretive and was unwilling to talk with me on tape, fearing he might give away a family secret. However, he did say that the key to his longevity in such a competitive business is very simple: give the customers what they want.

"We try to fix our food the way the people like it," Lawrence says. "Some like it chopped in chunks, some like it chopped to pieces."

Lawrence says he has eaten barbecue all over the Southeast and has built a taste for all types and regional preferences. He likes spicy sauces and offers a beef brisket, direct influences of Texas-style barbecue. He explains that developing a sauce that appeals to a large number of people and figuring out how to cook beef have been two of the biggest challenges in the business.

"Sauces are tricky. I like a hot sauce, but a lot of people don't want it hot. So, you have to develop a sauce for a broad audience," Lawrence explains. "A lot of people around here are turned off if a sauce is too hot or too sweet.

"The sauce can't overpower the meat. It has to support and complement the flavor of the meat. It can't

be too specific. However, if I don't like it, I have a hard time serving it."

Jim Deerman's has developed a nice following, despite the lack of exposure other barbecue places get and being in a location where development seems to be swallowing the

"The methodology of cooking barbecue is one of those things that I just don't think a machine will ever perfect (over) the natural way of doing it," says Van Sykes, owner of Bessemer's Bob Sykes Barbecue.

restaurant.

"When new customers stop in, they're almost surprised. It's like they took a chance on us," Lawrence says. "They may have heard about us

through word of mouth or they might be looking for a little bit more personal contact than they would get at other places."

THE GOLDEN RULE

The Golden Rule is a name every barbecue fan in Central Alabama is familiar with. The Golden Rule has been serving barbecue to Birmingham residents since 1820. Its original restaurant was located along US Highway 78 in Irondale, directly across the street from its current location. The Golden Rule is now owned by Charles Matsos who has established locations in Pelham, Hoover, Pinson and my hometown of Trussville.

The Golden Rule came to Trussville in the early 1990s after the city proper's only barbecue restaurant, Big G, closed due to a fire. The Big G was perhaps the most easily recognizable landmark in the city next to Joe and Harold's Barber Shop and the steeple atop the First Baptist Church. The Big G resembled an old red barn, complete with white trim and gable roof, and for years was the last business in town before you crossed the railroad tracks and heading up Roper Hill toward Moody. For almost two years, the small town of Trussville was without a barbecue joint. It may as well have been without a post office or gas station. However, the Golden Rule did unto Trussville as it hoped Trussville would do unto it and saved the day, opening its doors on December 8, 1993.

General Manager George Derzis has been with the company for over ten years and was there when the Trussville location opened almost seven years ago. Derzis has been in the restaurant business all of his life, but says his time with Golden Rule has been his best experience. Derzis, whose brother Sammy Derzis is the

general manager at the Irondale location, says Golden Rule's reputation for excellent barbecue and friendly atmosphere made it a perfect fit for Trussville. Derzis says the community was extremely supportive of the Golden Rule and probably more than a little hungry for barbecue in its town.

"The name Golden Rule has always been known for having excellent food, but it's a meeting place, too," Derzis says. "It's a homey place to meet where everybody knows each other. The response in Trussville has been incredible. I think things are only going to get bigger and better out here."

The Golden Rule has a slightly different cooking process than either Bob Sykes or Jim Deerman's. The meat is cooked for two hours in a smoker and then for three more hours on the barbecue pit. Derzis says there are some advantages to using a smoker, even though some barbecue experts believe the meat should be cooked completely on the pit.

"When business picked up, it was a lot harder to keep cooking it straight on the pit. It takes eight hours to cook one butt on the pit. You'd have to cook 24 hours, which you just can't do," Derzis explains. "The smoker cuts about three hours of cooking time and plus it stays moist."

Although a relative newcomer to the barbecue business, Derzis says he has always been a regular customer of the Golden Rule, long before he went to work for them. He also says that barbecue is one of the things that gives the Birmingham area its unique character.

"I guess you could call Birmingham the barbecue capital of the nation. Just in the Birmingham area you can see how many barbecue places there are," Derzis says. "There are probably more barbecue places in Birmingham than you have in some other states altogether. I think that makes this area special."

THE 10 COMMANDMENTS OF BARBECUE

While the cooking processes, tastes and techniques of barbecue are varied, there are some ground rules when it comes to authentic Alabama barbecue. These cover everything from the service and atmosphere at your favorite place to the food and cooking process. If any of these are missing, it might be time to consider moving your loyalty to another local hangout.

1. To be true Alabama barbecue, the meat should be pork. For most people throughout the state, this is not debatable. Once you cross over into beef, you're eating Texas-style barbecue.

2. The sauce must be a tomato-based red sauce. Again, the thick brown sauces are more an example of Texas-style barbecue sauce. Also, there are some sauces that are vinegar-based and are typically thinner and have more spice to them. These are an influence of North Carolina-style barbecue. A good Alabama sauce shouldn't be too sweet, nor should it be too hot. It should have just enough flavor to enhance the flavor of the meat and just enough spice to make you pop your lips from time to time.

3. The food must be fresh. What these experts mean by *fresh* is that a barbecue restaurant should cook on its pit every day. You should pull into the parking lot during a peak time of day and see smoke billowing out from the smoke stack. If a restaurant does not cook every day, you may be eating meat that is a day or two old.

4. It's not a true barbecue joint unless you leave with a little sauce on your shirt. Anyone who has ever eaten the ribs at Dreamland knows this is simply inevitable.

5. A true barbecue joint must be friendly—friendly waitresses, friendly customers. The mystique of a great barbecue place grows out of the loyalty between the staff and customers.

6. Framed pictures of Auburn and Alabama football players and coaches hanging on the wall are an absolute must. What would a barbecue place be without a picture of Bear Bryant smiling at you or a shot of that goal-line stand against Penn State for inspiration? Photos of NASCAR racers are also acceptable.

7. A good barbecue joint should have country music playing on the radio. I will admit this suggestion is more personal than actually based in reality. Many barbecue places now have a mix of oldies, country and pop music playing on their sound systems. To me, barbecue just begs for some Hank Williams or George Jones.

8. Keep it simple. The menu shouldn't be too fancy or metropolitan. White tablecloths, candles and a wine list have about as much place in a barbecue restaurant as egg rolls and fried rice. Some places, like Jim n' Nicks, have modified their operations to include a wait staff in black ties, but have kept with basics with their food.

9. A true Alabama barbecue joint must have a pit. Although some places, like the Golden Rule, have incorporated smokers into the process, the majority of the cooking still takes place on a barbecue pit.

10. The sign out front should, if possible, include a picture of pig. What would a barbecue joint in Birmingham be without a giant pink pachyderm smiling 20 feet in the air? 