

## AUTHENTICITY IN CENTRAL TEXAS BARBECUE

Working rough incomplete draft by Dennis Ray Wheaton

For over a decade America has been experiencing a barbecue renaissance, one that is built on authenticity. When Lolis Eric Elie published the revised edition of the seminal *Smokestack Lightning: Adventures in the Heart of Barbecue Country* in 2005, he wrote that his original view of 1996 that “this art, so vital to our national identity, was dying or at least endangered” was no longer true because he had not anticipated “the strongly nostalgic trend in the country these days, a longing for the old ways. A longing so strong it has brought real barbecue to relative prominence in places where it was previously little more than a novelty” (Elie, 2005: viii-ix; quoted in Moss, 2010: 230).

America’s recent barbecue renaissance owes much to Texas, where barbecue is a bedrock of the local culture. “It’s said that the Salt Lick barbecue, outside Austin in Driftwood, sees as many visitors as the Alamo”<sup>1</sup> (Mackay 2011: 5). According to the *Houston Chronicle* “Texas has 2,740 barbecue restaurants - about 500 more than in 2016, according to a 2017 report from food service data analytics firm CHD Expert. Not only has the renaissance spread the state's low-and-slow smoking style to all corners of the world, it has caused a proliferation of barbecue festivals, cookbooks, and online tutorials - and fostered an appreciation for other aspects of barbecue, such as inventive entrees and sides that can often set mom-and-pop operations apart from the pack” (Morago, 2018). This has led to a multiplication of barbecue restaurants nationally and a surge in the purchase or construction of backyard barbecue pits for home-cooking enthusiasts.

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<sup>1</sup> And like the Alamo, Salt Lick is largely a tourist destination. The high-volume Hill Country restaurant, dating from the 1960s, employs Ole Hickory (from Missouri) and Southern Pride (from Tennessee) gas-fired smokers in back to satisfy the high demand for meat, and finishes it up front in wood-fired show pits—anathema to Texas purists (Vaughn 2013: 87-91).

The national press has been filled with articles on the new barbecue craze. For example, *Esquire* recently featured a humorous piece titled “15 questions about barbecue answered,” including “Who invented it? Cavemen” and “Which regional style of barbecue is best? All right. We can do this the hard way or the easy way. The hard way involves us telling you how the regional differences are all equally valid and blah blah blah. The easy way is just to say Texas. . . . Maybe the real question is which style in Texas is the best?” The last question was “Where can I find the best barbecue in the world? Ok, legally registered gun to our heads, we gotta say Franklin Barbecue in Austin. But why not your own backyard? Every pitmaster started as a pitnewbie. Get off you pork butt and get smokin’!” (Diffie & Noth 2017:110-111).

It is not just Texas barbecue but one regional variety of Texas barbecue that has had the most influence in spurring the national barbecue renaissance. Texas barbecue is a tangled thing. The Texas food writer Robb Walsh says that “Southern barbecue is a proud Thoroughbred whose bloodlines are easily traced. Texas barbecue is a feisty mutt with a whole lot of crazy relatives. The Southern barbecue style has remained largely unchanged over time. Texas barbecue is constantly evolving” (2016: 18). Walsh has done much to lay out the complexities and different styles of Texas barbecue, starting with the 2002 edition of his *Legends of Texas Barbecue Cookbook*, and other observers largely follow these distinctions.

Briefly, Texas barbecue is divided into four major styles, which Walsh traces back before the Civil War: “African slaves on the plantations of East Texas, Hispanics in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, German immigrants in the Hill Country, and subsistence farmers of Scots-Irish descent all had their own meat cooking styles” (Ibid.). Today’s East Texas barbecue is a variant of the African-American southern barbecue tradition and centers on hickory-smoked pork ribs and pulled pork sandwiches while incorporating Texas beef, cooked very tender and often chopped in sandwiches. Much more than in the other styles, thick, sweet barbecue sauces typically drench East Texas barbecue (Vaughn 2013: 7). South Texas barbecue is derived from

Northern Mexican *vaquero* (cowboy) *barbacoa* and most famously includes whole cow heads or whole goats and lambs cooked overnight covered in a pit fueled with mesquite coals. West Texas barbecue (sometimes referred to as Cowboy or Hill Country barbecue,<sup>2</sup> where it is most prevalent), derives from Anglo cowboy cooking and usually involves cooking beef or pork over a hot, open mesquite fire.

The Central Texas barbecue style of cooking was developed by German and Czech immigrants who arrived as part of the larger European migration to America throughout the nineteenth century, beginning in the 1830s and reaching its maximum around 1890 (Walsh 2016: 34). They “brought with them Old World sausage-making and meat-smoking traditions,<sup>3</sup> and many opened meat markets and groceries in central Texas towns” (Moss 2010:163). They sold fresh meats and smoked leftovers in enclosed smokers, finding a ready market for smoked meats through the early twentieth century in a new wave of migrants: Mexican and African-American seasonal workers picking the vast local cotton fields.

They were probably astonished when migrant farmworkers began the tradition of eating that smoked meat on the spot. When food cooked in earthen pits was judged unsanitary by early health inspectors after the reforms of the Progressive Era in the early 1900s, the indoor German smokers became the model for barbecue restaurants. Which is why many people consider the old meat markets to be quintessential Texas barbecue joints, despite the fact that German smoked meats and sausages aren’t really American barbecue (Walsh 2016: 34-35).<sup>4</sup>

When after the Civil War, cattle ranching expanded in Texas, beef became widely available and remains the meat most characteristic of Texas barbecue. Today’s Central Texas barbecue centers around the low-and-slow smoking of meat—most typically the “holy trinity” of beef brisket, sausage (beef or pork or a mixture of the two), and ribs (usually pork but sometimes beef)—using indirect fire from locally abundant post oak.

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<sup>2</sup> The term “Hill Country” often creates confusion because some writers conflate it with “Central Texas,” as in Trillin’s referring to “the barbecue tradition that developed during the nineteenth century of German and Czech meat markets in the Hill Country of central Texas” (2008).

<sup>3</sup> “The smoked sausage produced by Czech and German meat markets in that area would have been virtually indistinguishable from the smoked sausage that butchers produced in central Europe” (Walsh 2016: 18).

<sup>4</sup> Barbecue fans in other parts of America sometimes complain that the Central Texas style with its paucity of marinades, rubs, and sauces is just smoked meat, like the famous German-heritage Nueske’s smoked meats from Wisconsin, which no one claims is barbecue.

While all four styles endure today in Texas restaurants, East Texas and Central Texas styles were the two that before World War II became most commercialized (Moss 2010: 199) and at least until recently, East Texas barbecue was the kind most often found in the urban and suburban areas of the state (Vaughn 2013: 7). But it is specifically the Central Texas barbecue style that ignited the present national barbecue renaissance, and the style is becoming dominant in urban areas with a new generation of pitmasters and their restaurants.

### Origin Story of Central Texas Barbecue

This history has become a major underpinning of claims to authenticity for Central Texas barbecue. The story of the beginnings of Central Texas barbecue is well known in the area around Austin, as recounted in a 2001 *Austin Chronicle* cover feature on “Central Texas BBQ Dynasties”:

Central Texas barbecue traditions evolved from a confluence of events in the second half of the 19th century. Refugees from the Civil War, both black and white, came to Texas looking for new land and a new start, bringing their recipes and cooking styles along. German and Czech settlers arrived with centuries of experience making sausage and smoking meats. The Chisholm Trail, a route for driving big Texas cattle herds to stockyards and railheads, passed through the area, bringing cattle in abundance. With over 100 years of refinement, the result of this culinary congregation is a reputation for world-class brisket and sausage, plus pork, chicken, mutton, and even cabrito that can hold their own with any man’s pit work. Whether it’s smoked over oak, pecan, mesquite or hickory, served on butcher paper in a historic family meat market, out the window of an aromatic roadside shack, or in a comfortable sit-down restaurant with a wine list, Central Texas barbecue is cause for pride and celebration.

It comes as no surprise to regular *Chronicle* readers that we take this hallowed barbecue tradition very seriously here at the paper. We embrace it heartily and jump at the chance to promote it to barbecue lovers such as ourselves as well as new and recent converts. This year, we’re spotlighting the legendary Central Texas barbecue dynasties, eight families who’ve dedicated themselves to the pit master’s art for generations. These folks have fed everyone from cotton pickers to presidents, deer hunters to diplomats, building solid family businesses with fiercely loyal clienteles (Wood 2001).

Several of the pitmasters we interviewed retold the story of how Central Texas barbecue began so mechanically and similarly that they seemed to have absorbed the same accounts

from newspapers, magazines, books, or online, as for example, the account from Wikipedia, which references and follows closely Walsh's 2002 edition of *Legends of Texas Barbecue*:

European meat-smoking traditions were brought by German and Czech settlers in Central Texas during the mid-19th century. The original tradition was that butchers would smoke leftover meat that had not been sold so that it could be stored and saved. As these smoked leftovers became popular among the migrants in the area, many of these former meat markets evolved to specialize in smoked meats. Many butcher shops also evolved into well-known barbecue establishments (Wikipedia 2017).

This origin story is now institutionalized into lore and legend by pitmasters and their customers. It is in large part true if somewhat simplified to omit references to racism surrounding just who many of the "migrants" were and why the habit of eating barbecue with no utensils or plates outside of the meat markets developed. [EXPAND?]. It is also such a foundation to claims of authenticity, with many old-line barbecue lineages like the Blacks and Muellers still in business several generations removed from their founders and proud to remind any and all, that barbecue restaurant owners and pitmasters sometimes strain to find linkages connecting them to this heritage.

[GLENN: Can you find earlier accounts of the Central Texas barbecue origin story? It would be useful to know. Everyone knows and recites the same story of how it got started and offers their connection to it as part of their authenticity claims. Was it only oral history until Walsh? I imagine now they are all reading the same books, Texas Monthly mag and blogs and telling the stories over and over again. If this section is useful, I can expand it with more specific examples of pitmasters and restaurants latching on to the origin story of Central Texas bbq.]

### The Central Texas Barbecue Surge

In the past decade the Central Texas barbecue style far outpaced the other Texas styles in popularity and was paramount in setting off the American barbecue renaissance through its wide influence. The most influential organization in this movement is the magazine *Texas*

*Monthly*. The most influential persons in this movement belong to a new generation of barbecue pitmasters working in urban centers and combining tradition and innovation under a banner of authenticity. By far the chief figure among them is Aaron Franklin in Austin.

For the past 45 years, the magazine *Texas Monthly*,<sup>5</sup> headquartered in Austin, has been highly influential in promoting Texas barbecue and especially the Central Texas style (Austin is in Central Texas, of course). Calvin Trillin, who has long been an wry observer and fan of the barbecue scene,<sup>6</sup> writes, “In fact, the title of *Texas Monthly*’s first article on barbecue—it was published in 1973, shortly after the magazine’s founding—was ‘The World’s Best Barbecue Is in Taylor, Texas. Or Is It Lockhart?’” The magazine put the classic Central Texas barbecue restaurants—Kreuz Market and Smitty’s Market, in Lockhart, and Louie Mueller Barbecue, in Taylor, surviving second-, third-, and fourth-generation restaurants that reflected the founding German and Czech meat market traditions—in the top tier of its initial 2003 survey of the best barbecue in Texas, and again in 2008, when for the first time it named a No. 1, which turned out to be another Central Texas establishment, the upstart Snow’s BBQ, an hour’s drive from Austin in the tiny town of Lexington, which nobody at the magazine had heard of before the survey began (2008).<sup>7</sup> The veteran and rare female pit master at Snow’s BBQ, Tootsie Tomanetz, was thus “‘discovered’ only after more than thirty years of tending pits. . . [and] became an instant star in the barbecue world” (Vaughn 2013: 352).

“*Texas Monthly* has had a strong posse of barbecue enthusiasts since its early days,” noted Trillin in 2008, but that tradition grew even more institutionalized when the magazine

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<sup>5</sup> “Texas Monthly is a monthly American magazine headquartered in Downtown Austin, Texas. Texas Monthly was founded in 1973 by Michael R. Levy and has been published by Emmis Publishing, L.P. since 1998 and now owned by Genesis Park, LP. Texas Monthly chronicles life in contemporary Texas, writing on politics, the environment, industry, and education. The magazine also covers leisure topics such as music, art, dining, and travel. It is a member of the City and Regional Magazine Association” (Wikipedia 2018).

<sup>6</sup> He once in *Playboy Magazine* famously called Arthur Byrant’s Barbecue in his home town of Kansas City, “the single best restaurant in the world.”

<sup>7</sup> Trillin (2008), who knows “some of the *Texas Monthly* crowd,” writes that “I could imagine the staffers not knowing about a superior barbecue restaurant in East Texas; the Southern style of barbecue served there, often on a bun, has never held much interest for Austin connoisseurs.”

named Daniel Vaughn to the new position of “barbecue editor” in 2013. Vaughn, who grew up in small-town Ohio, first came to Texas in 1998 and soon became so enamored of Texas barbecue that he created a popular blog, Full Custom Gospel BBQ, which led to his position at *Texas Monthly* and his influential book *The Prophets of Smoked Meat: A Journey Through Texas Barbecue*. The book chronicled his and photographer-friend Nicholas McWhirter’s automobile journeys to “stop and review every non-chain barbecue restaurant they pass.” That added up to “35 Days, 10,343 Miles, 186 BBQ Joints” (Vaughn 2013, Waddington 2013).

“The magazine currently has a paid circulation of 300,000 and is read by more than 2,100,000 people each month—one out of ten Texas adults,” according to *Texas Monthly*’s website. It lists among the magazine’s main content categories: “News & Politics, Being Texan, The Culture, Style & Design, Food & Drink, BBQ, and Travel & Outdoors.” Note that BBQ is separated out from Food & Drink, a sign of how essential the subject is to the publication and its readers. In November 2018, the magazine will host the 9<sup>th</sup> annual Texas Monthly Barbecue Fest Weekend in Austin. The website’s TM General Store has a “Barbecue Collection” including barbecue-themed apparel, wooden cutting boards in the shape of Texas, large framed reproductions of the magazine’s five different barbecue covers, and \$500 custom BBQ painted guitars signed by Robert Earl Keen<sup>8</sup>. The relationship between Texas barbecue and *Texas Monthly* has helped both institutions thrive.

Barbecue Editor Daniel Vaughn’s introduction to the June 2017 *Texas Monthly* cover story on the fifty best barbecue joints in Texas is worth looking at:

“Texas barbecue has no peer on earth.” That’s what I immodestly declared in 2013, when we published our fourth list of the fifty best barbecue joints in the state. We were right, of course, but I did wonder: Had we peaked? Was there nowhere to go but down? Four years later, the answer is clear. There was nowhere to go but up! Our appetite for smoked meat remains insatiable, and I can say, with gusto, that we are living in the golden age of Texas barbecue.

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<sup>8</sup> “From a porcelain replica of the Franklins BBQ tray to a hand drawn map of *TM* approved joints, we’ve found something for every ‘cue devotee on your list.”

And what defines this succulent era? First, quality. The cult-level popularity of barbecue has permanently changed the old landscape. When we compiled our very first list—twenty places—in 1973, smoking anything but the cheapest briskets was unthinkable; now, glistening slices of Top Choice—even Prime—beef are the norm. Restaurants serve butter-tender beef ribs and name-check the ranches they hail from on their menus. This is true from Wolfforth to Mercedes and Pecos to Spring, because excellent barbecue is also more widespread. A claim of “That’s great brisket” in Longview no longer has to be qualified with “for East Texas”; today’s pitmasters provide an excuse for a road trip to just about any far-flung corner. Once the term “Texas barbecue belt” meant the center of the state. Now it stretches far and wide.

Barbecue is easier to find too. Thanks to Twitter, Google Maps, Facebook, and Instagram, you can get a brisket or sausage fix when and where you need it. Decades ago, a barbecue trailer on a farm road could dry up and blow away in between customers. These days all it takes are a few raves on Yelp, and it has a good chance of success. This coincides with another trend: more than ever, barbecue is urban. Lockhart was once the smoked-meat capital, with three fantastic joints on our list in 1997; this year, the town has one representative. By contrast, Houston has four entries, Austin seven. At this rate, our next fifty best could come solely from our five or six biggest cities. (Don’t worry, it won’t.)

If there’s a dark side to all this, it is the cost—to our wallets and our patience. One reason cities are dominating is that they have customer bases that can afford brisket at \$20 a pound and foodies who think nothing of investing time in a barbecue line. “Democratic” is hardly the word for an hour-long wait for a \$35 beef rib. Still, I won’t complain too loudly, because cities also have armies of amateur reviewers who demand the best. Competition has a way of keeping the bar high for all of us.

Which brings me to a final trait of this moment we’re in: variety. In 2008 the quartet of brisket, pork ribs, sausage, and chicken ruled our list, and we lamented aberrations such as deli turkey. Since that time, the barbecue menu has been expanding faster than my waistline, with the addition of real turkey breasts, a renaissance in beef ribs, and a full-on embrace of pork steaks and chops. Great pulled pork has made a definitive invasion, and there’s even a little ham and pork belly to round things out. It makes you wonder what’s in store for the 2021 list. Anybody up for rattlesnake? —*Daniel Vaughn*

The most important single individual in the barbecue renaissance is widely recognized to be Aaron Franklin, the young celebrity pit master and champion of Central Texas barbecue. His namesake restaurant (his permanent location opened in 2011, two years after he started out in a trailer) on the east side of Austin not far from the state capital building and the University of Texas is marked by blocks-long lines of customers, usually young and often sipping beer, waiting often more than two hours for service, from long before it opens at 11 a.m. until it sells out around 2 or 3 p.m. six days a week. As its website boasts, “Franklin’s barbecue has been celebrated by everyone from Jimmy Kimmel to Anthony Bourdain to President Obama”



(<https://franklinbbq.com/about>). And in banner lettering, it quotes Bourdain, “It is the best. It is the finest brisket I’ve ever had.”

Walsh summarizes Franklin’s style and influence on Texas barbecue:

Recently, a back-to-the-roots movement in Texas barbecue has captured the attention of barbecue lovers across the country. A handful of young pitmasters is going back to the basics in hip, new barbecue joints in major cities across the state. They are the darlings of the national press, and the luscious new style of meats they’re serving is reviving the reputation of Texas barbecue.

Austin’s Aaron Franklin is the best-known of the bunch. . . . A second-generation barbecue man (his parents once owned a barbecue joint in Bryan), Franklin pioneered the trend of buying premium meat, charging higher prices, and serving a new style of barbecue. This brisket is fattier, has a crispy bark, is cooked to over 200° F, and is sliced as it’s served. Franklin is also expanding the genre. He not only serves a Southern-style pulled pork sandwich but also tops his pork and chopped brisket sandwiches with Carolina-style coleslaw (2016:41).

The restaurant critic of The New York Times describes the largely self-taught<sup>9</sup> Franklin as

“a gearhead and a MacGyver with obsessive tendencies. . . . In the 2000s, Mr. Franklin was designing and welding offset smokers and firing them up for loosely organized backyard cookouts. . . . What Mr. Franklin had stumbled across in his backyard was a craft in which, for both the maker and the consumer, the financial barrier to entry was low and the opportunity for connoisseurship was ample. These are the two chief prerequisites of any successful hipster food business, and Franklin Barbecue set off a new-traditionalist barbecue movement across the country” (Wells 2017).

According to Franklin, when he opened his initial trailer restaurant in 2009, there was almost no competition in Austin—only 3 places barbecued with live fire. “You had to drive 45 minutes to Lockhart, Luling, or Taylor to find good Central Texas barbecue” (2017). Franklin mastered the traditions of the style and has won many awards, among them “Best Barbecue in Texas” from *Texas Monthly* in 2013, “Best Barbecue in America” from *Bon Appétit* in 2011, and

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<sup>9</sup> Franklin did work briefly at the short-lived “Austin barbecue joint of John Mueller, grandson of the legendary Louie Mueller,” where he developed skill in applying rubs and cutting briskets for customers. As importantly, he says (2015: 17), he learned on his own that dealing with customers with an “amiable, hospitable spirit is important, something that we’ve always emphasized at Franklin Barbecue” (not by being mentored by the notoriously erratic and irascible John Mueller, called the “dark prince of Texas barbecue” by *Texas Monthly*).

became the first barbecue pit master to win a James Beard chefs award: Best Chef: Southwest in 2015.<sup>10</sup>

Vaughn writes that “Barbecue legends usually grow with age, but Aaron Franklin has proven that young guns can smoke some mean protein as well. At just thirty-four years old, he has gained more accolades per year of age than any pitmaster in recent history. In true Texas form, his briskets are magically tender and smoky due to simple ingredients. Neither special recipe rubs nor beef broth injections nor apple juice marinades have a place in this man’s kitchen. In short, Aaron has no secrets” (2013: 336). And, “It hasn’t hurt Franklin’s rise to fame that he’s articulate, charming, fun-loving, and in downtown Austin” (Mackay 2011: 8).

Franklin’s tremendous influence reaches beyond personal fame for the quality of his barbecue. He is the epitome of what the *Texas Monthly* barbecue critic and editor Vaughn refers to in his own book title—a “prophet of smoked meat”—the foremost expounder of his craft, explaining in elaborate, enthusiastic, and careful detail his own knowledge. He uses his own history and experience to inform. In *Franklin Barbecue: A Meat-Smoking Manifesto* (2015) he lays out elements of the craft of Central Texas barbecue, how to find a smoker or build a home or restaurant barbecue pit (any apparatus designed for barbecuing is called a “pit”), how to choose and season wood, how to handle fire, smoke, and cooking temperatures, and how to prepare and cook various kinds of meat. Recipes are almost an afterthought and are intended as general guides. Through the example of his barbecue mastery and business success and his commitment to teach his expertise—including the book (co-authored with food and wine writer Jordan Mackay), an Austin station PBS series, a webcast, a co-founder of the Austin food event

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<sup>10</sup> Louie Miller Barbecue, a third-generation Central Texas barbecue restaurant open since 1949, won in 2006. “Honored with the ‘American Classics’ award by the James Beard Foundation. Louie Mueller was the first BBQ restaurant in the country to receive such an honor” (<https://www.louiemuellerbarbecue.com/>). This claim is a bit of Texan bragging, since Mueller’s was actually the fourth American barbecue restaurant to be so recognized (Vaughn 2015).

called the Hot Luck Festival, participation in Foodways Texas<sup>11</sup> symposiums, and televised presentations at the Texas A & M Brisket Camp<sup>12</sup> demonstrating how he trims and carves briskets—Franklin is generally credited to be a major impetus for the renaissance and elevation of the Central Texas style to the forefront of American barbecue.<sup>13</sup>

His style is laid back and witty, admonishing interested readers and viewers not to fear experimenting and failing as they find what works for them. At the outset of his book he says that he’s trying to put down in words everything he knows about barbecue but he’s still learning himself and that “the process of cooking barbecue . . . is loosey-goosey.” There’s no “just one way. . . . You’re much better off with general knowledge of what you want and an arsenal of tricks to have up your sleeve. . . . Yes, I am wedded to the tradition of Central Texas barbecue and its principles it holds—brisket, oak, open flame—but I’m also always willing to try something new or look into new designs that might make things cook faster and better” (2015: 1).

Unlike most barbecue books, his “isn’t heavily focused on recipes. . . . It’s a more elemental and theoretical breakdown of the barbecue process. . . . I drill down into some fairly technical information with regard to how the process of barbecue works. It can get a little geeky. . . . I include this information because I myself love the technical details. Understanding how something works is the first step toward successfully replicating and improving it” (Ibid. 2).

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<sup>11</sup> Modeled after the Southern Foodways Alliance, Foodways Texas is “a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving, promoting and honoring the Lone Star State’s unique food cultures. It is affiliated with the American Studies Department at the University of Texas at Austin. Robb Walsh was a founder  
<https://news.utexas.edu/2014/02/04/foodways-texas-american-studies>

<sup>12</sup> Camp Brisket is a joint venture between Foodways Texas and the Meat Science Section of the Department of Animal Science at Texas A&M University that explores all facets of the centerpiece of Texas Barbecue, the beef brisket. The camp is coordinated by meat science educators, Davey Griffin, Ray Riley, and Jeff Savell.  
<https://bbq.tamu.edu/camp-brisket>

<sup>13</sup> “Aaron Franklin made it feel like it was possible,” says Esaul Ramos, the pitmaster who with partner Joe Melig in 2016 opened the quickly acclaimed 2M Smokehouse BBQ in San Antonio. “With little more than \$5,000 and a lucky break on a lease, Ramos and Melig went from dreamers to small business owners and Texas Monthly-hyped pitmasters in barely a year. It turns out, as long as you can smoke meat, there’s now a space for you in Texas barbecue” (Hatchett 2018).

A major reason behind Franklin's "magically tender" briskets, as he discusses in detail in his *Manifesto*, is that unlike the vast majority of Central Texas pitmasters, he uses Prime grade beef,<sup>14</sup> "which is by far the most expensive, but its marbling is important to the style of brisket I'm going for, which pushes tenderness and moistness to the extreme" (2015: 109). He stresses that "the beef we use comes from ethically treated cattle who are raised and slaughtered in a peaceful, comfortable environment. I have visited the plant and talk frequently with the company that supplies our meat, so I do have confidence that we're getting what we pay for. And we pay a lot for it" (Ibid.). However one may dispute the claim that a steer can actually be slaughtered peacefully and comfortably, this claim to avoid industrial-farmed cattle is a major claim to moral authenticity that surely resonates among many of his young, highly educated and morally approving Austin customers.<sup>15</sup>

Franklin also secures pork from ethical producers, pigs raised outdoors "who often forage and dig for their own food," a "hybrid heritage breed, a combination of the Chester White and Duroc breeds. The mix yields great marbling, tenderness, and juiciness—perfect for smoked ribs" (2015: 118). He admits that his sausage is still a work in progress (as of the publication date). He doesn't make it in-house but has someone else make it from his recipe using a mixture of his ethically raised beef and pork (including "around 3 per cent all-natural beef hearts") but he so far hasn't found a source of hog intestines for his sausage casings that isn't from anonymous commodity pigs. "It's a problem for which I still don't have a solution" (Ibid. 121-122).

Franklin's claims to type authenticity in following the traditions of Central Texas barbecue, his moral authenticity with ethically-raised meat, and his well-known and freely taught

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<sup>14</sup> A source is Creekstone Farms Natural USDA Prime, a Kansas-based company.

<sup>15</sup> Franklin's continual efforts to get enough "well-butchered, ethically raised meat" is something he mentions often in his writing and videos. He says, "As someone who makes his living selling enormous quantities of cooked meat—we're talking 2,000 pounds on our busiest days—meat quality is something I care deeply about. High-quality meat is by far our number one expense. Unfortunately, by far my number one headache is also the work it takes to secure the consistent supply of meat at the quality level we require" (2015: 103).

craft authenticity—including his well-publicized obsessive “MacGyver” skills as a welder, metal worker, and carpenter, which also amount to a strong claim to idiosyncratic authenticity—are all authenticity underpinnings for his enterprise.

Outside of Austin, other new-generation urban Texas pitmasters include Justin Fourton at Pecan Lodge in Dallas, named not for using pecan wood smoke but for a Fourton family ranch near Abeline, where he learned to barbecue using mesquite. One of the few in Dallas cooking with mesquite, Fourton is renowned for his huge beef ribs that can cost \$30 each and a similarly pricey special of locally-raised Wagyu brisket. His wife, Diane, makes a banana pudding (often served in Texas barbecue restaurants) inspired by her aunt’s recipe that Vaughn says “might be Texas’s finest.” Publicity on the Food Network enhanced the restaurant’s long lines (Vaughn 2013: 307, 309, 336; Walsh 2016: 41).

Ronnie Killen at Killen’s Barbecue in Pearland, a southern suburb of Houston, is also known for USDA Prime brisket, giant beef ribs, pork belly and home-style dishes like creamed corn made from fresh corn off the cob.

The Corkscrew BBQ trailer in north Houston is run by the husband and wife team of Will and Nichole Buckman, who, not long after opening, found themselves installing a new J&R Oyler smoker with an eighteen-hundred-pound capacity to keep up with the demand.

What all of these places have in common are expensive grades of meat, wood-burning pits, fattier brisket with crunchy bark—and long lines of ‘cue hounds waiting for the kitchen to open. The line isn’t just a sign of popularity, however. Aaron Franklin suggests that having people waiting in line is critical to the quality of the barbecue.

When every bit of meat is carved as it is ordered, fresh off the smoker, every customer gets a juicy slice. That’s the way it was done years ago, before high-tech barbecue existed. Just ask Vencil Mares at Taylor Café. The dean of Texas pitmasters slices his brisket just like he did when the place first opened in 1948—with a layer of fat on top. “You cut that fat off and you’re cutting all the seasonings off,” he told barbecue writer Daniel Vaughn. . . .

In 1952, in Fort Worth’s *Star-Telegram*, Texas writer J. Frank Dobie observed that “the barbecuers of restaurants . . . all agree that in recent years demand for lean meat is making men and women alike into Jack Sprats. Fat meat is much more easily barbecued than lean meat, and the old timers all wanted fat meat. Young people nowadays don’t want fat, and lots not young don’t either.”

While the new breed of pitmasters is getting a lot of press, they prepare only a tiny percentage of the barbecue consumed in Texas. But lots of traditional barbecue joints have taken notice, so that more and more pitmasters are offering a choice of lean meat or brisket with the fat attached. And you don’t even have to queue up to get it.

Who is willing to wait in line for a plate of fatty barbecue? You probably won't be surprised to hear that it's the same gang of hipster food lovers who made *chashu* ramen, Wagyu hamburger, and all kinds of pork belly dishes popular (Walsh 2016: 41-42).

### Craft Authenticity in Central Texas Barbecue

The authenticity of Central Texas barbecue lies in adhering to the recognized social category of Central Texas barbecue. The category has a tightly recognized set of components, which are embedded in the folklore of the small set of recognized founding families of the style, delineated in books, publications like *Texas Monthly* and the *Houston Chronicle* (in print and online), blogs by practitioners and aficionados, in seminars and hands-on classes by the nonprofit organization Foodways Texas, in the techniques disseminated at various Texas cook-off competitions, taught by a profusion of online videos, and maintained and passed on by pitmasters of the style—in restaurants, trailers, and backyards.

The elements of style in Central Texas barbecue are not complicated. The simple orthodoxy of authenticity stipulates local post oak for fuel; slow and indirect heat; the Texas trinity of brisket, sausage, and pork ribs but sometimes other cuts such as beef ribs, beef clod, pork chops or pork steak; a simple rub and often no sauce unless its served on the side. It's not complicated but it is complex, and the complexity is in the craft required to do it successfully. With few exceptions, there are no "secrets." Vaughn says, "The point is that the secrets of a pit master aren't in the ingredients of the rub or the sauce or the wood or the cooking time. The secret is their skill at knowing how to react to the meat and to the fire all the way through the cooking process" (2013: 330). And Aaron Franklin's 2015 book amounts to an owner's manual for anyone learning the craft of Central Texas barbecue

Among the most skilled pitmasters, what elevates the very best is consistency. Turning out perfect barbecued beef brisket every day and from opening to closing, usually after tending

to the pits all night long, is exceedingly difficult.<sup>16</sup> Changes in weather—temperature, humidity, and wind—change the cooking time required and how the smoking process in the barbecue pit progresses. Then, how the meat is held from the moment it is finished to the moment it is served can change its quality. A problem is that barbecue, and especially brisket, does not keep well. The very best, perfectly smoked meat should be cut to order and eaten immediately. We often noted in eating brisket at Central Texas barbecue joints that within minutes of being cut and served, the meat began to dry out and toughen. Vaughn refers to the deterioration in quality that comes from improper holding—drying out, sogginess, or greasiness, often accompanied by loss of flavor—whether from time on a steam table or rewarming on a grill or, worse, in a microwave—as “storage fatigue” (2013: 85).

Post oak is the most widely used wood for Central Texas barbecue not only because it creates good quality smoke but because it is common there and the tree’s extreme knobiness makes it unsuitable for good lumber (Vaughn 2013: 171). Franklin stresses the importance of controlling wood, fire, and smoke in the craft of barbecue. He spends a great deal of time in his book and television shows explaining how to obtain,<sup>17</sup> evaluate, cut, stack, season (drying green wood), and properly burn post oak logs to make the best fuel for heat and smoke. Just as “fire and smoke are what set barbecue apart from other forms of cooking . . . cooking solely on wood fires is what sets great barbecue apart from the bad or the merely good”:

Managing a fire is the most important aspect of the pitmaster’s job. It’s the crucial factor that determines the success or failure of your endeavor (not to mention hours and hours of time and hundreds or thousands of dollars’ worth of meat). We pitmasters are more thermal

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<sup>16</sup> “I’ve found that pitmasters who meet with success on the competition circuit rarely put out exemplary smoked meats in their restaurants. I’m not sure exactly what accounts for this phenomenon, but I think some of it has to do with the vastly different requirements of the two contexts. At a barbecue competition, you have to cook one or two perfect briskets, which you serve immediately, whereas at a restaurant, you have to smoke a dozen briskets at a time and hold them all day long” (Vaughn 2013: 250).

<sup>17</sup> Various pitmasters we interviewed in Central Texas spoke of the travails of obtaining a steady supply of good wood. A few were fortunate to own land where post oak trees grew. Franklin writes of his envy of the “infinite-seeming, all-you-can-burn wood yard out back” at Kreuz Market in Lockhart (Franklin & Mackay 2015: 80).

engineers than we are cooks. Igniting, coaxing, cajoling, molding, suppressing, and enabling fire is the essence of our work (Franklin & Mackay 2015: 85).

While noting that he has been so immersed in smoke for so many years that even multiple showers can't erase the scent of burning wood on him, Franklin goes into great detail explaining the nature of smoke, quoting one of "his favorite books," the daunting *Modernist Cuisine*, that "if you understand some of the basic chemistry of smoke, you gain control over its effect on flavor and appearance" (Ibid. 86). He concedes that wood is hard to control, which helps explain why many new barbecue places avoid it: "Gas, electricity, and charcoal are popular in most modern barbecue restaurants because they run with timers and computers and are most convenient and efficient. But in my mind there is no substitute for good, old-fashioned wood" (Ibid.).

Franklin stresses that there is "good" and "bad" smoke. One is lighter and finer and complex, with an impact that "is powerful yet strangely delicate at the same time. There's an ineffable sweetness and a level of finesse that penetrates every bite. That's good smoke." Meat that has absorbed bad smoke has "an acrid taste to it that verges on a bitter aftertaste." It has "a caustic, corrosive harshness. And it lingers biting in your mouth long after you've finished it." "Getting your fire to the state in which it's producing good smoke most of the time is one of the most crucial aspects of barbecuing with wood," and a pit master has to rely on the "eyes and nose to determine when our fire is a good one" (Ibid. 91).

After discussing the production and qualities of good smoke with the precise language of a wine expert, including how smoke contains all three usual states of matter--solids, liquids, and gases--and how each contributes to or detracts from the desired effects of smoke on meat, he argues for the superiority of his traditional Central Texas authenticity over newer technology adapted to urban conditions:

This is why, in my opinion, classic Central Texas barbecue is so good. The whole art is predicated on making a fire with near-complete combustion and generating hours and hours of



the pure, sweet good smoke. The gas and electric smokers that so many restaurants use these days don't rely on wood to create their heat. Rather, the wood is there only to supply smoke, and it's often smoldering or choked off. Obviously this is not a strategy based around good fires, and thus these cookers and any others that inhibit airflow end up producing a lesser, more acrid smoke, which is why I don't care for them. We've seen these kinds of cookers take over mainstream barbecue, especially as enthusiasm for it has bloomed in major metropolitan areas where it's not as easy (for practical and legal reasons) to burn so much wood. But in recent years, it's also heartening to see a small trend back to the original, purist form that I practice (Ibid. 94).

Thus Franklin, and the members of the new wave of urban pitmasters following his lead, advocate for traditional methods in achieving authentic barbecue, but with a new level of understanding of the underlying science of the craft that approaches what those chefs of modernist cuisine—sometimes called molecular gastronomy—create with high technology. But Franklin and other “purists” show disdain for the convenience and efficiency of new barbecue technology “run with timers and computers.” For them, authenticity and perfection in flavorful barbecue come from traditional craft handled with modern scientific understanding.

The craft of Central Texas barbecue is classically focused on the quality of the meat itself, which is why rubs are often simply salt and pepper, barbecue sauces often are absent or are served only on the side, and side dishes are often minimal. As Travis Waddington, a Texas mathematics teacher and someone “who spends too many of his weekends eating barbecue” observes, “When I say barbecue I don't mean anything to do with sauces or rubs or glazes or all of the other tricks that non-Texans can associate with the word. I mean the simple alchemy of smoke and meat” (2013). Trillin (2008) puts it this way: “In central Texas, you don't hear a lot of people talking about the piquancy of a restaurant's sauce or the tastiness of its beans; discussions are what a scholar of the culture might call meat-driven.”

This authenticity is grounded in the local culture and environment. Just as beef is central to Texas barbecue because it was historically widely available, the barbecue pits themselves originated in the materials and skills at hand. Central Texas barbecue restaurants often cook meat in metal offset smokers of a style that originated from the craft and resources of Texas oil

field workers. “Offset smokers, like the ones at Franklin, owe their popularity to the deep connection in Texas between the oil and barbecue industries. . . . Oil extraction and refinement require a lot of metalwork, and so it’s quite common to see barbecue smokers cut from old oil drums or welded from sections of heavy steel pipe. There are stories that in down times for the oil industry, bosses had their welders build barbecue pits to keep them busy” (Franklin & Mackay 2015: 43). Franklin, Snow’s, Terry Black’s and other places make long multi-door offset smokers from large (up to 1,000 gallons) used propane tanks

There are more codified rules that constrain Texas barbecue joints:

Barbecue is, by definition, a primitive cooking process. The health laws in many Texas counties do not allow restaurants to cook outdoors. Folks who have barbecue joints often build tin roofs, screened porches, and other elaborate facades to bring the outdoor cooking indoors (at least technically). In outlaw tradition, the best barbecue generally comes from a joint that is in the most trouble with the health department (Walsh 2016: 263).

[Glenn, this would be a good place to reference your paper on Chinese restaurants and the authenticity appeal of health code violations. Expanding here on the legal constraints of permitting open smoke in urban areas might be useful as well. Would it be useful to include a reference to the welder/family friend we talked with at Terry Black’s somewhere around here?]

This helps explain the attractiveness of opening a barbecue business in a trailer, in addition to the low startup cost.

“Good barbecue begets good barbecue. When a community is exposed to good barbecue they begin to expect it. If another joint opens, then it better be as good or better as the last one” (Vaughn 2013: 120). This may be true of any restaurant scene in any area, but it is especially true when the authenticity and quality is so sharply focused on craft. Central Texans have generations of experience with this straightforward but hard-to-perfect style of food, and so many regular customers are very capable of judging authenticity and quality. This is also true for the new generation of sophisticated barbecue fans living in urban areas who value authenticity in many areas of their lives.

## Idiosyncratic Authenticity

But this authenticity is elastic on many social levels. There are exceptions to every tenet of the Central Texas barbecue orthodoxy. Where once Central Texas barbecue was a world of white men, it now includes African-Americans, such as highly regarded pit master Jerome Faulkner (who learned the craft from his uncle) and partner Cedric Leonard Griffin (a former professional football player), who opened J. Leonard's Barbeque in an Austin trailer in December 2016. And one of the most famous living Central Texas pitmasters is a woman. Tootsie Tomanetz<sup>18</sup> has elevated Snow's BBQ in Lexington to the very top of *Texas Monthly's* list of the best in 2008 and again in 2017. In 2018 she was named a James Beard Award semifinalist in the best chef category for the Southwest region (she did not make it to the finalist round).

Most places still use post oak, but others utilize at times locally available woods—mesquite, hickory, pecan, and other species of oak—with good results. Most barbecue with low and indirect heat, but Smitty's Market (the old Kreuz Market) in Lockhart, “a temple of Texas barbecue that many folks ardently claim is their favorite in Texas” has a roaring open double-fireplace pit built into the floor where “they cook the meat quickly with a much higher heat than is normal in an indirect smoker. Temperatures reaching 500 degrees don't make for low-and-slow” (Vaughn 2013: 272-273). And John Mueller, a third-generation son of the revered Central Texas Mueller clan and brother of Wayne Mueller who runs their grandfather Louie's and father Bobby's old Louie Miller Barbecue in Taylor, follows this unorthodox method:

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<sup>18</sup> The Central Texas barbecue credentials of Tootsie Tomanetz, now in her 80s, run deep. “From 1976 to 1996, in fact, Tootsie Tomanetz, who is known far and wide in Lee County as Miss Tootsie, served barbecue every Saturday at a meat market that she and her husband ran in Lexington. Miss Tootsie's husband is half Czech and half German. She was born Norma Frances Otto, German on both sides . . . . Before the Tomanetzes opened their store, Miss Tootsie had put in ten years tending the pits at City Meat Market, in Giddings” (Trillin 2008).

If great barbecue were all about patience, John Mueller would be out of a job. He hasn't got the time for the low-and-slow version of Central Texas barbecue served up most everywhere in Austin. Mueller hammers the meat with intense heat from a blazing firebox. The beef in his smoker will never know the gentle heat of a marathon overnight cook. Mueller arrives at the pits at 2:45 a.m., and lights a fire big enough to abuse briskets into submission. They're done in 5 or 6 hours, and served piping hot. Steam escapes from the sliced beef as if the meat is still gasping to recover from the sprint. This is John Mueller-style barbecue, and he has no plans to change it at the new Black Box Barbecue trailer in Georgetown.

Mueller learned the trade from his father, Bobby Mueller, at Louie Mueller Barbecue in Taylor. Bobby tried to instill his patience with barbecue into John's cooking, but it didn't take. "It would drive him crazy every time I lifted that lid," Mueller told me. When asked about the old adage "If you're looking you ain't cooking," John laughed. "Not when you're burning 400 degrees." It's the way he's cooked since opening his own place in Austin in 2001. His barbecue style hasn't changed since then, although he's struggled to stay in business. John Mueller Meat Co. in Austin was the latest casualty. After a three-year run it was seized for non-payment of sales tax. A few months later he was working on his next barbecue chapter outside of Austin (Vaughn, 2017b).

Central Texas pitmasters are also expanding on the holy trinity of brisket, sausage, and pork ribs in the meats they barbecue. Smitty's is also famous for cooking beef shoulder clods and prime ribs as well as brisket. Beef shoulder clods have been around since the beginning, but more recently the Central Texas repertoire of meats expanded to include beef cheek, pork steak, baby back ribs, pulled pork, chicken, and turkey. This is especially true of a new generation of new wave pitmasters who first trained as chefs, such as Evan Le Roy at LeRoy and Lewis in Austin.

LeRoy was classically trained in culinary school and worked at Hill Country <sup>19</sup> in New York (whose website quotes New York Times restaurant critic Pete Wells calling it "a state-of-the-art Manhattan homage to the preindustrial craft of Texas barbecue") before returning to

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<sup>19</sup> Mark Glosserman, founder of Hill Country Market and Barbecue in Manhattan has his own origin Central Texas story: "Marc's Texas roots date back four generations. His grandfather was the mayor of Lockhart, Texas, a small town near Austin with the distinction of being the official 'Barbecue Capital of Texas' and he is descended from a long line of Texas women with exceptional southern cooking skills. As a child, Marc looked forward to his Texas visits where he indulged in all the local traditions, including eating smoked sausages and barbecue at the legendary Kreuz Market, drinking Big Red Soda, cooling off with Blue Bell Ice Cream, and enjoying the sounds of Austin's rock, blues and country music" (website <https://hillcountry.com/>)

Austin first as the original pitmaster at Freedman's then joining up with the food truck operation LeRoy and Lewis in Austin in 2017. LeRoy calls this truck and location phase one of their plan toward opening a restaurant. Other pitmasters we interviewed in Central Texas called him a "chef" with respect. The day we visited he was cooking beef cheeks, pork liver boudin, Nashville style chicken wings, and double cut pork chops from Peaceful Pork ranch south of San Antonio, and serving a beet barbecue sauce. He also has put on the menu beef belly bacon, duck ham, oxtail, duck confit and more, reserving Saturdays for more traditional items like brisket, pork ribs, sausage, and turkey.

LeRoy also said that his attraction to barbecue is "how primal it is." He also is attracted to the strong barbecue culture in Texas, how it is such a "personal thing." To him, the authenticity is in the method, which can be seen in his classic central Texas steel tank offset barbecue apparatus (which he said he built himself) and his post oak, and his use of sustainably and humanely raised meat sourced from Texas farms. The creativity is in his menu, although on weekends he tends toward more traditional meats and preparations in the central Texas style. Thus LeRoy utilizes type and craft authenticity in his technique but idiosyncratic authenticity in his weekday menu.

Some Central Texas barbecue places also become large, such as Terry Black's, which has 140 employees and longer hours, all while keeping to the core tenets of Central Texas barbecue. [EXPAND]

Oakwood BBQ & Beer Garden in Austin, opened in early 2017, looks and tastes like Central Texas barbecue, "but owner Mark DeLong and pit master Wally Colvin have quickly built a fan base on nontraditional barbecue fare" like pulled pork tacos, Frito pie, and grilled cheese and brisket sandwiches (Vaughn 2017a). John Brotherton of Brotherton's Black Iron BBQ in Pflugerville smokes first-rate brisket but goes new wave with creative barbecue sandwiches, such as brisket French dip and brisket *banh mi* with house-made *kimchi* (Vaughn, 2017c).

Other talented new wave Austin pitmasters include Jerome Faulker at J. Leonardi, and Tom Mickelthwait, at Micklethwait Craft Meats. [EXPAND]

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