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The Kentucky Barbecue Book

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I am large, I contain multitudes of barbecue.

—Walt Whitman, speaking in a western Kentucky drawl, overheard in a vision I had on May 27, 2012, while strolling near the confluence of the Green and Barren rivers.

I’ve recently been diagnosed with Hyper Enthusiastic Barbecue Disorder (HEBD). I’m supposed to drink eight ounces of KC Masterpiece daily to make the cravings go away. The prescription isn’t working very well. I still get the nervous trembles when I think about deliciously smoked meats. But I do know this: I’m not fond of KC Masterpiece and many other major-brand sauces—thick concoctions sweetened with corn syrup and sometimes tainted by unnatural-tasting liquid smoke.

My students sometimes tell me that their lives are so busy it’s difficult for them to turn in work on time. They ask for extended deadlines. I say, “You think you’ve got it bad? I got HEBD. I can’t even concentrate on what you’re saying to me right now. Sniff. Sniff. Is that the smell of pig flesh cooking over wood smoke? You don’t even know distraction until you got HEBD. Now glue yourself to a chair and finish that essay.”

Like a lot of barbecue lovers, I’ll drive a good piece out of the way for the chance of tasting some good smoked meats. In summer 2009 I drove from Kentucky to Florida, on the way stopping at three barbecue joints to check the fare. First stop: Fresh Air Barbecue and Brunswick Stew in Jackson, Georgia. I went there on the recommendation of Vince Staten and Greg
Johnson, authors of *Real Barbecue: The Classic Barbecue Guide*, what one blurber (*Glamour* magazine) calls “the ultimate barbecue book.” Well, I’m fond of the writing of Vince Staten, having worn the cover off his *Jack Daniel’s Old Time Barbecue Cookbook* since I bought it in the early 1990s, and I’ve eaten at the barbecue place bearing his name in Prospect, Kentucky, three times. (It recently closed after eighteen years in business.) I’m also thankful for his and Johnson’s barbecue guidebook. How else can a road traveler feast on fine smoked meats without doing some serious Internet searching? Staten and Johnson make finding a good place pretty easy, as they describe in *Real Barbecue* their top one hundred restaurants, joints, and shacks they’ve found in twenty-eight states, coast to coast, over the past twenty years.

As I approached Fresh Air, my heart started thumping rapidly. Searching for the place, I’d accidentally driven off course for forty-five minutes, so by the time I reached the Promised Land my barbecue jitters had come on. It was past 1:00, and just a couple of pickup trucks were parked in the gravel lot. I admired the rustic architecture of Fresh Air, which has been in this same location since the 1920s. I smelled wood smoke and saw piled wood off to the south of the restaurant. A smoking chimney stuck up prominently from the center of the building.

*Oh, Lord,* I thought. *I’m going to savor some good barbecue today.*

Inside, I scanned the menu and was impressed by the limited offerings —simply chopped barbecue sandwiches and plates. I ordered a “deluxe plate,” envisioning something outstanding (since *deluxe* suggests opulence), and here’s what I received: a paper plate with a smallish portion of pork on it; a small cup of Brunswick stew; saltines; a small cup of slaw; a pickle. Two slices of white bread. Sweet tea. This was deluxe? The small portion of meat disappointed me. *False advertising,* I thought. Sure, I could have made a sandwich by shoveling the puny portion between the slices of bread, but I wanted to taste the meat. My assessment: good stuff, but not the best I’ve ever had. The sauce was a tangy, vinegary, tomato concoction, and the meat had a mild smokiness. According to Staten and Johnson, the pit tenders at Fresh Air smoke hams for over twenty hours.

Well, I’ve smoked whole hams and shoulders for over twenty hours at home, after having local Barren County farmer Joe Michael Moore (who makes and sells the best country sausage ever) kill a hog for me, and the result
has been some deeply smoked barbecue with lots of good bark mixed in with the milder interior meat. At Fresh Air, the meat wasn’t so smoky. The amount was smallish. The slaw was okay (mayo, green peppers, vinegar, cabbage). The Brunswick stew? I don’t see what the big deal is. It’s like veggie-pork soup cooked down to slurry, a less savory version of Kentucky burgoo. I liked the atmosphere of Fresh Air, and I liked the stripped-down menu. But after eating I felt less than satisfied.

What was missing? Smokiness. Quantity of meat. Interesting side dishes. So even though I admire the good judgment of Staten and Johnson, I’m willing to admit that my tastes differ. And even though I haven’t eaten at a thousand barbecue places, I’ve tripped around the country sampling many of them, and I’ve slow-smoked whole hams and shoulders and racks of ribs at my house. I’ve also judged at barbecue competitions in the Memphis Barbecue Network.

I lean toward a deeply smoked taste—not one of bitterness, which comes from cooking meat at too-high temperatures and using too much of certain types of wood like white and red oak, but the earthy, sweet-salty smokiness that comes from a whole pork shoulder smoked a long time at low temperatures using a goodly portion of hickory. I’m also fond of spices and I like dry rubs, but they aren’t necessary if the pork shoulders or chicken halves or beef briskets have absorbed lots of smoke and there’s some salt added to bring out the natural rich flavor of the meat. I love the bark of smoked meats. I usually prefer a vinegar sauce to a sugary one. I love black pepper, and I’m mighty fond of spicy heat.

In short, when I ate at Fresh Air, listed by Staten and Johnson as “As good as we’ve ever had,” I thought, I can tell you where to find some barbecue better than this!

I’m here to tell you that Kentucky has some really fine barbecue, and that my home state’s rich traditions of barbecue have been pretty much overlooked by food writers and the Travel Channel. Texas has been well covered, as has North Carolina. A recent television show had cowboys do blind tastings of various regional barbecue styles, and the styles represented were from North Carolina, Texas, Memphis, and Kansas City. In 2011 Southern Living did a story, “The South’s 20 Best BBQ Joints,” featuring what the authors considered to be “perfect plates of barbecue in four major regional styles.”
These regional styles were, no surprise, the same ones mentioned above. The article was written by Matt and Ted Lee of Charleston, South Carolina, and while I admire their food expertise (I paid good money for a copy of their weighty *The Lee Bros. Southern Cookbook*), I’ve got a mutton bone to pick with them regarding this list of “the South’s best” that doesn’t include a single barbecue joint in Kentucky.

I read and watch these stories and think, *Now, hold on a durned minute here—where’s my beloved Kentucky?* Off many barbecue aficionados’ maps, apparently, and that’s a shame since the Commonwealth/Bluegrass State has much to offer the barbecue thrill seeker. When hitting the roads of Kentucky in search of fabulous barbecue, I’ve discovered that many establishments, especially in the western part of the state, still cook old style, shoveling hot hardwood coals under meats elevated on grates inside cinderblock pits. Fat drips down onto the ashes and coals and sizzles back up into the meat, creating that special barbecue taste that smoke alone can’t make. Of course, such a cooking style requires careful watching and long tending. Cooking with coals can also be dangerous. I talked with several people in my journeys whose barbecue places had suffered fire damage or burned down completely. Frances’ Bar-B-Que down in Monroe County in south-central Kentucky burned in 2009. They’ve moved closer to the town of Tompkinsville and are back in business. Peak Bros. in Waverly also burned, but they continue smoking meats in a new restaurant. It’s a risky business, this cooking with wood coals but, like I say, it produces a smoke flavor like no other.

The newfangled gas and wood hybrid cookers like the popular Southern Pride and Ole Hickory units that so many barbecue places have switched to can deliver a tasty product, especially if the meats are seasoned right. The big ovens hold a steady temperature and are fire safe, allowing restaurateurs to go home instead of needing to tend the pits all night, and most units are equipped with rotissieres to keep the meats moving for even cooking. The gas-cooked meats are usually moist and tender, and more often than not mild to moderately smoked. Outside the cooking chamber (an oven with rotisserie), a gas-fired flame creates smoke by torching sticks or chunks of wood. You can throw lots of wood into the firebox to create a more intense smoke flavor, but many folks using gas cookers don’t because they want to conserve expen-
sive wood and because regular firebox loading takes more work. Moreover, some places cater to mainstream tastes for less smoky meats. Ben Webb at Dave’s Sticky Pig told me his wife wasn’t fond of barbecue because she didn’t want to “eat a campfire.” No wonder some barbecue places cut back on wood.

Comparing old-fashioned pit barbecue with gas-cooked meats, I’d say the pros and cons are pretty clear. Old-fashioned methods are more labor intensive, more prone to pit fires, and more expensive (using wood for fuel costs much more than gas, at least in the long term). With both methods, you can get moist, tender meats if you cook at low temperatures for a long time using indirect heat. As for taste, the gas-wood hybrid cookers don’t create the distinctive dripping-fat-and-sizzle, deeply smoked effect that comes from cooking over hardwood coals. When you try whole pork shoulders cooked a few feet above hickory coals for twenty-four hours at 200–220°F, you taste something that can’t be reproduced in a gas oven. It’s comparable to tasting a country ham that’s aged in a barn through a year of Kentucky seasons instead of in a temperature-controlled warehouse.

On the Road to a Comprehensive Tour of Kentucky Barbecue

I’ve wanted to write a book on Kentucky’s best barbecue since moving back to the green rolling hills of cave country in 2005, having sojourned for a while in the barbecue wastelands of the Midwest. My goal was simple enough: eat at every barbecue place in the Commonwealth and write a travel guide to direct readers to the best, describing and rating the food along the way.

After hitting the road in summer 2009, I soon realized the challenges of describing smoked meats, potato salad, baked beans, slaw, and sauces dozens and dozens of times without sounding like a broken record. How many words are there to describe the essential qualities of good barbecue: tenderness, moisture, and smokiness? I started boring myself pretty quickly when listening to my digital voice files from those early trips.

As I traveled more widely, I discovered that the stories of the people I met added depth, or flavor, that complemented my descriptions of the food
I ate. That’s why I returned to Clinton in far-western Kentucky to revisit Nicky’s and Grogan’s nearly three years after my original trip. I wanted to get more stories about the places—not just the food. My original write-ups were scanty compared to the later ones. I wanted to give these places the attention they deserve.

I think of Kentuckians as a particularly rooted people, proud of their lands and customs, and touring the Commonwealth from the Mississippi River to Appalachia and most parts in between has reinforced this sense of pride in place. And no wonder! Kentucky is gorgeous, blessed with thousands of miles of freshwater streams, striking karst topography, green fields, diverse deciduous forests, and productive farmland. I feasted my eyes on fields of corn and soybeans, weathered tobacco barns, grass-covered roller coaster hills, pastures dotted with rolls of fresh hay and cattle. I stood on the banks of the Ohio River at Paducah, Uniontown, and Maysville, watching the water roll, and admired the sailboats on Kentucky Lake. I fell in love with the state all over again, and I’ve tried to capture a sense of the regional landscapes and local customs in these pages.

I began my tour of Kentucky barbecue in the western part of the state, the Mecca of smoked meats. Native Kentuckians identify with counties, as in, “I’m a native of Barren County.” Ask someone from Chicago where they are from and they don’t say Cook County. But ask a Kentuckian, especially one from a sparsely populated area, and you’ll likely get an answer that includes a county name. Perhaps this is because we have so few big cities in Kentucky—only four with populations over fifty thousand—but our medium-sized state is divided into a whopping 120 counties. So I tried managing my barbecue research by making a county by county list, from west to east, and then checking the yellow pages for listings of restaurants (or shacks) that looked like they might serve barbecue. I also asked for recommendations from acquaintances across the state and called real estate offices, whose business is to make the customer happy, asking for their local recommendations. I quickly discovered that many places listed on the Internet are now closed. I called places and asked how long they’d been in business and also their opening hours. Then I set out in my rusty Ford Ranger to try the meats and, if finding them at least good, to interview the pit tenders and owners to learn about their cooking methods and history in barbecue.
What strikes me most about Kentucky barbecue is the sheer variety of meats that individual joints smoke. In *Holy Smoke: The Big Book of North Carolina Barbecue* (a wonderful barbecue compendium), John Shelton Reed and Dale Volberg Reed define North Carolina barbecue as meat

1. that has been *barbecued*—that is, cooked for a long time at a low temperature with heat and smoke from a fire of hardwood and/or hardwood coals;
2. that meat being *pork*—whole hog, shoulder, or (occasionally) ham—
3. sometimes basted and always served with a thin *sauce* or “dip” that is at most only a slight variation on a traditional recipe including vinegar, red pepper, and maybe (or maybe not) tomato.

Note point number two: the meat must be pork to qualify as North Carolina barbecue. Well, pork is popular in western Kentucky, of course (we ain’t fools), but the pit masters in this corner of the universe near the confluence of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers also smoke up mutton, beef brisket, chickens, city ham, precooked turkey breasts, and bologna. No kidding. Now I’m not liberal enough in my definition of barbecue to seriously give bologna—a meat that comes precooked before you throw it on the smoker—a spot on my list of “real barbecue.” But mutton? Have you tried slow-smoked mature sheep? If not, you need to come visit us in western Kentucky, over to Owensboro and a few nearby counties to get your taste buds around the gamy taste of sheep slow smoked over hickory (and sometimes sassafras) for many hours. And while it’s true that brisket is a Texas specialty, I’ve tasted some brisket in Kentucky that rivals in deliciousness the brisket I ate at McBee’s Barbecue in Uvalde, Texas, or at Camphouse Barbecue in Ft. Stockton, Texas—both mystical brisket experiences in which the smoky, tender beef hit my taste buds and popped a huge grin on my face that didn’t go away for many miles. I still smile lovingly when thinking of those beautiful meats, and fortunately I no longer have to drive to Texas to taste something comparable.

A conundrum anyone on a barbecue road trip has to deal with is the question of what to get. Apparently this isn’t much of a problem in North Carolina. But in Kentucky, where meat smokers are throwing many varieties of animal flesh on the pit, a problem arises when you have only one stomach and many places to try before you sleep. My initial method when walking
into a barbecue place was to ask the owners or meat smokers what they do best. What is their specialty? I would then evaluate the place based on what they recommended. I continue to use this method—trying to find out what places specialize in and the local favorite—but I’ve also been disappointed by the most popular items at certain barbecue establishments and preferred instead one of their less popular meats. This is especially true when trying pulled pork cooked on gas cookers—often recommended by proud employees at barbecue places, often a local favorite, and all too often disappointing to me. However, I sometimes found the ribs, brisket, and chicken wings smoked at these same places much more satisfying, even though they weren’t recommended. When they were available, I often ordered sampler platters. At other times, like when I spied the beautiful pork ribs laid out underneath the glass at the ordering counter at Old Hickory Bar-B-Q in Owensboro, my anticipatory salivary glands and tummy-mind sent my brain a clear message: *Order these now!*

Another issue to confront while barbecue road tripping is side dishes. Should you fill valuable space in your stomach with mediocre pork and beans? When I first started my journey to discover Kentucky’s best barbecue places, I stopped at Bad Bob’s in Murray, having driven west from my home base in Bowling Green, and the head cook recommended his pork ribs. So I ordered a rib plate with mustard potato salad and “peach baked beans.” The potato salad was good, but the beans weren’t doctored up enough for me—didn’t have the big flavor of baked beans loaded with lots of onions, peppers, spices, and at best, shreds of smoked meats. To this day I cannot understand why many barbecue places don’t offer better side dishes. If a place wants to specialize in smoked meats only, fine. But if a place offers side dishes, then they should at least taste like something, right? My rule is to try side dishes if any place offers unusual ones, if my belly at that particular time can hold it. This becomes an issue when making the rounds of a county like McCracken (county seat: Paducah), which hosts at least six legitimate barbecue places. Even though I may see potato salad on the menu and want to sample it, I don’t like wasting food, and if my belly is already swollen beyond repair for a particular day, then I’m going to leave off the side dishes, unless the menu includes something like homemade jalapeño peppers stuffed with country ham.
and goat cheese, rolled in batter and deep-fried. I’d probably make room for something like that.

At other times, like when I’m fortunate enough to eat at just one barbecue place during a day, I’ll get side dishes, even though I’m rarely impressed by them. I’m a sucker for good potato salad, but unfortunately I’ve tasted only a few specimens that lodged in my food brain. I have to go out of state for my favorite potato salad, served at 17th Street Bar and Grill in southern Illinois. Mark’s Feed Store in Louisville offers a comparable potato salad, with lots of sour cream and eggs. The loaded potato salads at Big R’s and Shannon’s in La Grange and at Pig in a Poke in Prestonsburg are also worthy of valuable stomach space.

If a place takes extra special pride in food preparation — making everything from scratch using the best ingredients possible — I’ll let you know about it. Like I say (and if you’ve eaten at many barbecue places you know what I’m talking about), too many places dump pork and beans out of a can and heat them up. But there are wonderful exceptions, like Scotty’s in Louisville, where the side dishes come from homemade recipes and not from industrial food service. Such places, if they can smoke good meats, get an extra feather in their cap for an overall good-eating sensory experience.

What I’ve Learned about Smoked Meats from the Barbecue Trail

When I began this indulgent quest, I’d already eaten plenty barbecue in my nearly forty years of living, and I thought I knew what I liked. I was a fan of thin-sliced pork shoulder grilled on an open pit over hickory coals and basted with a vinegar-pepper dip — the stuff we called “Monroe County style” that defined my earliest barbecue experiences. I knew I liked deeply smoked, tender, sliced beef brisket from my Texas travels. I loved dry-rubbed ribs, having eaten them in Memphis while living nearby in north Mississippi. I knew that thick, sweet sauces weren’t my thing, and that my palate preferred meats without much sauce, especially if seasoned and smoked well. A vinegary, peppery sauce was my preference. I also thought that cooking over gas
was inferior to cooking in traditional ways over wood coals or, second best, manufactured charcoal.

A little bit about my background: I grew up in Barren County, Kentucky, in the south-central part of the state, not far north of the Tennessee line. The barbecue style of my youth revolved mostly around what locals call “shoulder”: oval slices of pork, bone in, cooked on an open pit over hickory coals and sopped with a dip of vinegar, butter, lard, black and cayenne pepper, and salt—closer to an eastern North Carolina sauce than what you’ll find in western Kentucky. I ate plenty of that as a boy, as my Uncle Roy spent hours tending his homemade cinderblock pit, smoking sliced shoulder and chickens and kielbasa and hog ribs. In the spring Roy sent me off with a paper sack to cut pokeweed, and later he'd cook up a big mess of poke salad and we'd eat those rich greens with the meats he'd smoked up throughout a long day. So even though I cut my barbecue teeth on thin-sliced, vinegary pork shoulder grilled over hickory coals, my palate has always been open to trying new foods, and therefore I’ve been delighted by barbecue styles from far southwest Texas to Kansas City to middle Georgia. And I’ve eaten at least some decent stuff up near Chicago, although most of what I’ve had from that region depends too much upon thick sauce and not enough on long smoke.

As I’ve eaten around the Commonwealth, my tastes have changed a bit, but most of my original preferences—fashioned by what I ate in my youth, from my mother’s excellent home cooking to Uncle Roy’s vinegar-based meat smoking—have remained intact. My reverence for open-pit grilled sliced shoulder has declined somewhat after I’ve eaten the long-smoked, closed-pit pork shoulders of western Kentucky. And tasting the best of pork (tender, moist, and deeply smoked) from places like Prince Pit BBQ, Grogan’s, Mr. BBQ & More, Leigh’s, and Knockum Hill has set the bar high and made me more critical of other pulled and shredded pork styles. I’ve noticed a pattern in my reviews: in places lacking an excellent pulled-pork tradition, when I try several of the meats I often find myself disappointed with the so-called pulled pork (often finely chopped and sauced) and favoring instead such things as ribs, brisket, and half or quarter chickens (not “pulled chicken,” which often comes from white breast meat and has never impressed me). Ribs, chicken, and brisket are more forgiving of gas cooking than larger pieces of meat (like whole pork shoulders or Boston butts) are. A rack of ribs, a chicken, and
sliced shoulder can soak up a lot of smoke in a short time, and if you like smoke—a characteristic of real barbecue—then this is a good thing.

In my year(s) of meats, I discovered that precooked turkey breast, city ham, and bologna may taste good when smoked, but that I usually found myself saying, “Eh. It just tastes like deli ham or turkey with smoke added, nothing special. Not really barbecue.” I believe that raw meats are best for soaking up smoke and creating the true barbecue flavor.

Approximately one-third of the places featured in this book smoke meat with some kind of gas or electric cooker. This makes Kentucky a better destination than North Carolina if you want meat cooked over wood or coals. My basis for this claim is Jim Early’s comprehensive tour of North Carolina barbecue, laid out in his book *The Best Tar Heel Barbecue, Manteo to Murphy* (published in 2002). Early discovered that about 40 percent of North Carolina barbecue places use some kind of gas or electric hybrid ovens. As I traveled east in Kentucky—getting farther away from prime pulled-pork and mutton country—I found myself recommending brisket and ribs more often. Gas cooking is also more prominent east of I-65—more places using Southern Pride, Ole Hickory, Fast Eddy’s by Cookshack, or some type of homemade gas cookers. I agree with the writers of *Holy Smoke* that the Southern Pride units are Ironically named.

I still haven’t grown to like “crock-pot pork” or “sloppy joe pork”—shredded and sauced pork that reminds me of the stuff served at my elementary school cafeteria. Why go to all the trouble of smoking a hunk of meat for twelve to twenty-four hours if you’re going to mask the flavor with sauces? But see, that’s a problem when cooking on the gas units, which—with a few exceptions—don’t impart a distinctive smoky real barbecue flavor unless the pit tender keeps throwing logs into the gas burner. Since these units hold a steady temperature like an oven, I understand the temptation to go home and get a good night’s sleep while the meats bake. Unfortunately, the results aren’t as good, at least not for larger cuts like Boston butts and whole shoulders and quartered mutton. For those accustomed to sauced shredded pork, the long cooking doesn’t matter as much. It’s akin to putting lots of A-1 or Heinz 57 on a steak. Those sauces are just fine for a piece of chopped steak. But it’s a shame to mask the flavor of a good rib eye with them.

A note on sauces: I like all kinds, but I do favor vinegar over sugar and
tomato, and I always order hot if offered. (Full disclosure: in 2001 I won the jalapeño pepper-eating contest at Fiesta Hispana in Rockford, Illinois.) Sauces can too easily overwhelm smoked meats, which should have substantial flavor before the addition of sauces. This flavor can come largely from smoke and salt, or it can be enhanced by rubs and injections. Of course, if you like biting into a sandwich and tasting mostly bread and sauce (or slaw or pickles), then that’s your business. Me? I want to taste smoky meat, tender and juicy, and I’m not opposed to the vinegary tang imparted by a drizzle of sauce. Maybe this is why I’m fond of mutton, as smoky, tender mutton marries well with the tangy black dip sauces you’ll find at the four Owensboro barbecue places and at western Kentucky Catholic church picnics. There’s nothing else like this flavor in the barbecue kingdom, and it’s rare to find outside a few counties in western Kentucky.

By the way, my palate has broadened to appreciate a range of sweet sauces, like the complex melon sauce (which doesn’t contain melon) at J. J. McBrewster’s in Lexington, or the awesome, fruity “sweet Hawaiian” sauce at Big Kahuna in Leitchfield. I’m hardly a poster boy for moderation, but when it comes to sauces I can usually just say no. Such an attitude might brand you as an outsider in Prestonsburg where, according to Brian Cramer of Pig in a Poke, 99 percent of the barbecue-eating populace wants their meats heavily sauced.

An Abbreviated History of Kentucky Barbecue

“And God said, Let the earth bring forth the living creature after his kind, cattle, and creeping thing, and beast of the earth after his kind: and it was so.” Then cattle, hogs, sheep, and other delicious things made of meat appeared on earth.

Fast-forward a few years to when Kentuckians, living when the United States was young, cooked God’s creatures over fire and shared the smoky gifts at big celebratory socials. Virginians had squeezed through Cumberland Gap and brought with them into the Great Meadow (an early nickname for Kentucky) some barbecue know-how. One citizen of the young Republic, bird painter John James Audubon (who, ironically, killed the creatures he loved in
order to paint them), wrote about a Fourth of July barbecue he observed in Kentucky in the early 1800s:

The free, single-hearted Kentuckian, bold, erect, and proud of his Virginia descent, had, as usual, made arrangements for celebrating the day of his country’s Independence. The whole neighborhood joined with one consent. No personal invitation was required where everyone was welcomed by his neighbor, and from the governor to the guider of the plough all met with light hearts and merry faces. . . .

Now the waggons [sic] were seen slowly moving along under their load of provisions, which had been prepared for the common benefit. Each denizen had freely given his ox, his ham, his venison, his turkeys, and other fowls. Here were to be seen flagons of every beverage used in the country; “La belle Riviere” had opened her finny stores; the melons of all sorts, peaches, plums and pears, would have been sufficient to stock a market. In a word, Kentucky, the land of abundance, had supplied a feast for her children.

A purling stream gave its water freely, while the grateful breezes cooled the air. Columns of smoke from the newly kindled fires rose above the trees; fifty cooks or more moved to and fro as they plied their trade; waiters of all qualities were disposing the dishes, the glasses, and the punch-bowls, amid vases filled with rich wines. “Old Monongahela” [whiskey] filled many a barrel for the crowd. And now, the roasted viands perfume the air, and all appearances conspire to predict the speedy commencement of a banquet such as may suit the vigorous appetite of American woodsmen.

Barbecue, according to Audubon’s account (which is quoted in Robert Moss’s book *Barbecue*), is cooked by the people, for the people—a communal food well befitting a commonwealth. I see here the early makings of the great community barbecues of present-day western Kentucky—the summertime picnics hosted by Catholic churches, for example, of which I’ll say more later.

Moving ahead to the late 1800s, the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, on November 7, 1897, published an account of a big barbecue and burgoo shin-dig near Versailles in Woodford County, under the Twitter-disqualified title:
Considering how the barbecue hotbed of contemporary Kentucky is the western part of the state, I’m struck by how the unnamed reporter, writing just over a century earlier, claims, “Although that noted Kentucky institution, the barbecue, is not by any means confined to the Bluegrass, yet it is only there that it reaches its happiest development.” Woodford County, the writer continues, “is pre-eminently the favored spot for holding barbecues.” These Bluegrass barbecues, held on the properties of wealthy men, “marked great epochs in Kentucky politics.” For instance, in 1836 Kentuckian Henry Clay, a U.S. senator, returned from Washington for a big barbecue near Versailles, bringing with him Daniel Webster and Governor Poindexter of Mississippi. All three gave fiery speeches that day against President Andrew Jackson. Woodford County resident Colonel Thomas M. Field, present at the event, said, “It was about the first big barbecue ever held in Kentucky.” In 1860, Colonel Field attended another huge political barbecue in the Bluegrass. He remembered it as probably the largest and most celebrated barbecue ever given in Kentucky or the South. [The event] was held in the pasture of Willis Jones, . . . one mile east of Versailles, and given by the old Whig Party and the Democratic Party, which stood in favor of Kentucky’s neutrality, to John J. Crittenden, who was Kentucky’s peace member in Congress. Crittenden that day was to make a great speech in which he was expected to outline a plan of reconciliation. It was more of a National than a State barbecue, and attracted men to Versailles from a dozen different States, especially from Virginia. . . . Mr. Crittenden spoke for two hours, and made a masterly speech. That barbecue and that speech were the turning point that caused Kentucky to delay action until the Union party had established camps and posts throughout the State. The crowd
present on that day was estimated at 25,000, and a magnificent feast was served to the multitude.

Nearly forty years later, the importance of political barbecues had decreased in the state because, the "Louisville Courier-Journal" reporter posits, Election Day had been changed from August to November (increasing the chances of bad weather and dampening barbecue spirits).

So Kentuckians have been barbecuing on a grand scale since their land became a state in 1792 (or soon thereafter, according to Audubon's account), and that tradition continues today with such massive events as the annual political picnic at Fancy Farm and at Owensboro’s International Bar-B-Q Festival, where cooks prepare thousands of gallons of burgoo and roast thousands of pounds of meat, much as their ancestors did at that Bluegrass barbecue of fall 1897 I’ve been meandering toward. I’ll close this abbreviated history with a description of that barbecue and burgoo feast:

The burgoo and the roasted (or barbecued) meats are even more essential features of the Kentucky barbecue than the speeches and are always associated with the occasion in the mind of the public. Preparation for this part of the entertainment usually begins the day before and continues throughout the night. For the meats, a pit or trench, from 100 to 150 feet in length, three feet deep, and three and one-half feet in width, is dug, in which hickory wood fires are kindled. The wood is burned down until nothing remains but the hot ashes, which generally takes five or six hours, and then the huge carcasses of beeves, mutton, and shoat, pinioned on either side by iron bars, are laid across the trench side by side and allowed to roast slowly. . . . The cooks stand by and baste the meats, constantly turning first one side and then the other to the fire. Occasionally the grease from the meats drips on the coals below, causing them to blaze and smoke. Buckets of water are kept conveniently near for the purpose of quenching the flames, for it would take only a few minutes for the meats to become smoked and utterly ruined. There is nothing so delicious as a juicy piece of barbecued mutton or shoat, done to a turn, unless it be a cup of Kentucky burgoo.
The Kentucky Barbecue Book

The making of good burgoo is even more difficult than the roasting of the meat, and requires more time. The burgoo at the Martin barbecue last week was made by M. Gustave Jaubert of Lexington, who also attended to the roasting of the meats, aided by ten assistant cooks. Jaubert has been at the business for thirty odd years, and is Kentucky’s past grand master in the art of brewing burgoo. In fact, M. Jaubert claims to have made burgoo what it now is. It was originally a Welsh product, and for many years after its introduction into Kentucky was a watery soup made of beef, chicken, corn, tomatoes and other vegetables. M. Jaubert increased the number and quantity of its ingredients until he gave it its present consistency, and a distinctively Kentucky flavor. Burgoo is properly eaten from a tin cup with a spoon, and is a square meal in itself.

On that fine day in 1897, M. Jaubert and crew cooked up one thousand gallons of burgoo. Jaubert provided the Courier-Journal writer his recipe, which included “400 pounds of beef, six dozen chickens, four dozen rabbits, thirty cans of tomatoes, twenty dozens cans of corn, fifteen bushels of potatoes, and five bushels of onions. It takes burgoo ten or twelve hours to cook, and it requires constant stirring.”

Jaubert said he was awake all night tending to the burgoo and barbecue: “First, I filled up the two big kettles—one containing 700, and the other 300, gallons—with water; then I put in the beef and the chickens, and let them boil until daybreak, when we skimmed off the froth of grease that had formed on the surface and took out all of the bones. The vegetables and the seasoning, including a quantity of red pepper, were than [sic] put in and allowed to cook for five hours, and the burgoo is ready to be served.” At the time of the feast, each person present got a pint-sized tin cup and scooped his or her portion of burgoo out of large tubs, then walked to an “improvised table” and “there [was] served by waiters with bread and barbecued meats.” At the big Bluegrass barbecue of 1897, the picnic table “was nearly half a mile in length,” and the crowd, “which was estimated at from 5,000 to 7,000, made away with 5,000 loaves of bread, 56 sheep, 6 shoats, and 2 beeves, in addition to the 1,000 gallons of burgoo that failed to hold out.”

Historical good times in the Land of Plenty, and the good news is that you can find similar scenes now, 115 years later, at Owensboro’s Internation-
Introduction

al Bar-B-Q Festival every May, at the Fancy Farm picnic in August, or on a smaller scale at numerous picnics hosted by Catholic churches located mostly in the western counties of Kentucky during the barbecue season (spring through fall). Check out the church picnic schedule in this book for approximate dates (see “Bluegrass, Blues, and Barbecue Region”). The traditions have moved westward and evolved—through the Cumberland Gap, into the Bluegrass (where the burgoo got thicker), and on to the western Kentucky counties where, thankfully, they’ve rooted deeply.

Kentucky’s Regional Barbecue Styles and Sauces

In the western counties, the preferred barbecue is pulled or chopped pork from whole pork shoulders or Boston butts. Traditionally, pork shoulders cooked on concrete block masonry pits for twelve to thirty hours, depending on the size of the shoulder, the type of wood used, the temperature inside the pits, the weather, and other factors like pit design. Pit masters burned down wood, mostly hickory, to coals and shoveled these underneath the meats every one to two hours, trying to keep a steady pit temperature. The most impressive pits have heavy thick insulated lids that are raised with the help of pulleys and cables. Many of the western counties are also fond of smoking cured hams (city hams) and precooked turkey breasts, slicing them thinly to serve on sandwiches. Sauce styles vary county by county. The Hickman County sauce is mostly vinegar and cayenne pepper. Some McCracken County sauces taste strongly of vinegar and chili powder. Union and Henderson counties favor a savory Worcestershire-based dip, while over in Christian County to the east the sauces turn again to vinegar and cayenne. It’s safe to say that although Kentucky is most famous for mutton, pork is still king, dominating barbecue menus throughout the state.

Mutton, however, is our most distinctive claim to barbecue fame, although only 18 out of 160 places I visited serve it. The “Mutton Tree,” as I’ll call it, is concentrated in western Kentucky, with Christian County and Hopkins County forming the trunk of the tree, branching out into Union, Henderson, and Daviess counties for the upper foliage. Owensboro is mutton central, with all four barbecue restaurants serving it. Mutton is usually bast-
ed while smoking over hickory coals and served with a savory Worcestershire sauce–based dip, a thin, black potion that also contains vinegar and spices like black pepper and allspice.

Another noteworthy regional tradition—called Monroe County style—dominates barbecue menus in five south-central counties: Monroe, Barren, Cumberland, Allen, and Warren. This is the stuff I grew up eating. Locals refer to it as “shoulder.” Boston butts—the thick end of a pork shoulder—are frozen and then cut into thin slices, bone in, with a meat saw. Pit masters traditionally burned down hickory wood to coals and shoveled the coals underneath iron grates that held dozens of slices of shoulder. As the meats cooked over hot coals, the pit tenders flipped and basted the pieces periodically with a “dip” of vinegar, lard, butter, cayenne and black pepper, and salt. Because of the small surface area, pieces of shoulder soak up a lot of smoke in a short amount of time. Preferred length of cooking is around forty-five minutes, but on a hot fire you can grill a piece of shoulder in fifteen minutes.

Beyond these three major regional barbecue styles, I’ve noted some general taste preferences and peculiar methods of barbecue preparation that I’ll label “microregional flavors.” I’ve learned, for instance, that a few Louisville barbecue places really slather on the sauce, and that this trend continues in the northern and eastern counties. The sauciest pork sandwich I encountered during my journeys was the “Big Smokehouse BBQ” at the Smokehouse in Tollesboro, way up in Lewis County, not far south of the Ohio River. The sandwich was shredded meat blended with a thick tomato sauce, like a porky sloppy joe. The most famous rib place in northern Kentucky is the Montgomery Inn, a Cincinnati-based franchise with a restaurant in Ft. Mitchell. Their ribs are basted in a thick, tomato-based sauce—and like I say, they’re beloved by locals. Furthermore, barbecue is hard to find in Appalachia, but at Pig in a Poke in Prestonsburg, the local preference is for sauced barbecue. And in the same counties serving “Monroe County–style” grilled sliced shoulder, you’ll find a menu item called “shredded.” Lovers of naked smoked meats—beware! “Shredded” usually comes from Boston butts, often boiled and then drowned in a tomato-based sauce.

Something I do like is the barbecue on toast tradition of a few counties in the far west of the state, preferred in McCracken, Livingston, Lyon, and
Hickory-smoked pork shoulder, city ham, and turkey breasts. Sauce varies by county, from vinegar to mustard to tomato.

Pork shoulder, pulled, with vinegar-cayenne table sauce

Pork on toast

Hickory-smoked mutton and mutton dip, burgoo

"Chipped" ham, pork, mutton

Monroe County style: pork shoulder and vinegar dip

Beef brisket, beef ribs—a blending of U.S. styles
Caldwell counties, although you can find it elsewhere, like in Graves County. Hickory-smoked pork or mutton is pulled or chopped and served on toasted bread with sliced raw onions and dill pickles.

I also like the “chipped” tradition of Union and Henderson counties, where the bark (the darkened and sometimes charred exterior pieces) of pork shoulders, hams, and mutton quarters are chopped and mixed with a thin, tangy sauce, which adds moisture back into the fire-dried meats. Because bark has so much smokiness, “chip” packs a wallop of flavor and is best eaten as a sandwich.

Burgoo, a stew made from many meats and vegetables, is found primarily in a funky triangle that runs from Owensboro (the burgoo capital) down to Madisonville, south to Hopkinsville, south to Guthrie, and back to Owensboro. You can find burgoo outside this region, but it’s rare.

Finally, a note on Louisville and Lexington: I haven’t detected any distinctive styles linking the barbecue places in these cities or their environs. Rather, they seem to be melting pots of barbecue styles, serving Texas brisket, Memphis-style dry-rubbed ribs, and western Kentucky–style pork and mutton. Indeed, two of the oldest restaurants, Ole Hickory Pit in Louisville and Billy’s Bar-B-Q in Lexington, and newer places like J. J. McBrewster’s and Sarah’s Corner Cafe in Lexington, bill themselves as “west Kentucky–style” establishments. Two other urban upstarts, Hammerheads and Smoketown USA—both located in the appropriately named Smoketown area of old Louisville—blew my barbecued mind with their smoked lamb ribs, smoked duck, and smoked pork belly (masterminded by young chefs Adam Burress and Chase Mucerno of Hammerheads) and meaty Flintstone beef ribs (the creation of Smoketown’s “Jewish redneck”—his words, not mine—pit master, Eric Gould). With so many new places opening up in both cities in the past few years, I’d say the future looks promising for barbecue in the Commonwealth. Surprisingly, many of them are cooking on tank units with external fireboxes, using a lot of wood to create what Vince Staten and Greg Johnson call real barbecue.

The Recipes

I hope you enjoy the recipes in this book, because getting them hasn’t been easy. I’ve called places and asked sweetly. I’ve said sharing a recipe with the
good people of Kentucky (and beyond) should be good advertising. When I make something good at home from a restaurant’s recipe, it makes me want to go try the original. I own the great barbecue wonderworks Mike Mills and Amy Mills Tunnicliffe’s Peace, Love, and Barbecue and Chris Lilly’s Big Bob Gibson’s BBQ Book and have used many of the recipes from both. When the dishes taste great, as they usually do, I don’t say, “Now I can make this at home so I don’t have to go to the restaurants.” Instead, I’m saying, “Daggum! I wish we lived closer to the 17th Street Bar and Grill in Murphysboro, Illinois!” (owned by Mike Mills, coauthor of Peace, Love, and Barbecue) or “Don’t we have some reason to drive to Decatur, Alabama?” (home of Big Bob Gibson Bar-B-Q).

Many people have a proprietary attachment to family recipes, and I understand that, especially in the realm of barbecue, which might coddle more secrets than all other cuisines combined. But do you really have to keep Aunt Suzie’s recipe for mac and cheese tied up close to your chest, especially when multiple cookbooks and websites like epicurious.com and foodnetwork.com give easy access to recipes from great food minds like Alton Brown, Bobby Flay, Chris Lilly, Mike Mills, and the Neelys?

In short, I called many of my favorite barbecue places and requested recipes for this book. Some folks declined politely. Some needed reminding and ultimately delivered. And some, like Dave Webb of Dave’s Sticky Pig in Madisonville, delivered in grand style.

I’m grateful to the generous folks who contributed recipes from across the Commonwealth. Dear Reader, I hope you’ll get to travel to the different regions to sample the varied flavors and styles of the state, but even if you’re bound to home, you can now taste what makes a Monroe County sauce different from a Land between the Lakes sauce and an Owensboro mutton dip.

The Ecology of Barbecue

Well, the short version is that it’s hard to balance a love of barbecue with ecological sensibility. When I started my journey, I usually asked barbecue people where they got their meats, hoping to find some who bought from local butchers or small-scale hog farms, but after hearing “Sam’s Club” numerous
times, I stopped asking the question consistently. I know that Ross and Ross in Tompkinsville provides sliced shoulder to over forty barbecue places, and that Hampton Meats in Hopkinsville sells to several of the places I visited in western Kentucky. But where do these meat processors get their hogs? Does it even matter? Who cares where the meat comes from as long as it tastes good, right?

In *Holy Smoke*, the Reeds ask a similar question: “Is any other dish made with less attention to its basic ingredient than barbecue?” They encountered in North Carolina much of what I found in Kentucky: that “nearly all barbecue restaurants cook basically the same pork you can buy at Food Lion or Harris Teeter, most of which comes from Smithfield Foods or one of the other corporate giants that account for more than two-thirds of the pork produced in the United States.” Thanks to economies of scale, these businesses—the Smithfields and Tysons—give us cheap meats while contributing to such environmental problems as water pollution from waste runoff and the depletion of aquifers (industrial hog farms, like those in the Texas Panhandle, require huge amounts of water). Animals are confined and get fed plenty of antibiotics. In *Pig Perfect*, Peter Kaminsky notes that “more than 80 percent of all the antibiotics consumed in the United States are used in the livestock industry; eleven million pounds per year by animals versus three million by people,” and that concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) rely heavily on them to keep packed-in animals from spreading sickness. You can read more about this sorry business in Ken Midkiff’s *The Meat You Eat: How Corporate Farming Has Endangered America’s Food Supply* and in Michael Pollan’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma.*

So the question “Where do you get your meat?” became less interesting as I went along, but it still niggles me that something that tastes as good as barbecue often comes from animals that spend their brief lives in packed-in quarters.

My cousin Karen and her husband, Steve, down in Clinton County, Kentucky, used to raise some hogs on their small farm but stopped because the price of pork dropped so much because of the corporate supply that they couldn’t make a profit. The price of pork dropped so much because of the corporate supply that they could hardly break even on the costs of raising the hogs.

I know how expensive this can be, because my wife, Elisa, and I recently raised two Durocs. In April we bought the little brother-sister team from a
farmer in Upton and transported them in a small dog kennel to our five-acre homestead here in Richardsville. Short Timer (the castrated male) and Red Bud (the female) slept and ate and rooted and played in a pen off the side of the shed, where they slept. They quickly ruined the goodly stand of grass, digging down deep for the cool earth in the dog days of summer. We fed them twice daily, often pizza from a local buffet and expired bagels from a shop in town; sometimes expired cakes and jams and hot dogs from a grocery store dumpster. Short Timer and Red Bud loved these surprise meals, just slurped the stuff up (we'd soak the pizza before feeding it to them). But we also had to buy several truckloads of pig feed at $20 for one hundred pounds, which, let me tell you, didn't last long.

When Joe Michael Moore (one of my high school football coaches—now a retired teacher and full-time farmer) guided us through the killing of our hogs in December, Red Bud tipped the digital scales at 444 pounds; Short Timer weighed 388. Elisa and I both teared up when Joe shot Red Bud with a .22 rifle. We skinned and butchered them, cured hams, made bacon and sausage, including salty jowl bacon. The work was exhausting, but we were fulfilled and felt we knew pigs so much better, inside and out. The four huge hams are hanging now in our garage. Hopefully they'll be wonderful this winter, after aging through a year of Kentucky seasons.

Point being, raising hogs is hard work, but I wish all the pork I ate from restaurants came from pigs that led lives as good as Short Timer and Red Bud. They seemed real content during their eight months with us—sort of like goofy dogs, with wagging tails and spastic circle turning in the pen when we turned the watering hose on them on hot afternoons. Short Timer liked rubbing his bulk on my leg like I was a fence post, just scratching off the dirt.

Back to the ecology of barbecue: most joints and shacks I've visited are also notorious wasters of polystyrene takeaway boxes, what everybody calls “Styrofoam.” At many places, all “plates” are actually sectional polystyrene foam boxes, and one is served plastic forks and paper napkins. Cups are Styrofoam, too. This stuff is hardly ever recycled. Every time I go to Smokey Pig in Bowling Green I balk when disposing of the Styrofoam box in the trash receptacle by the door—often piled high with the voluminous boxes. Day after day, all this nonbiodegradable material goes to a landfill. No wonder it's so
ubiquitous: you can buy the sectional containers in bulk for 18¢ each—probably cheaper than hiring someone to wash china or reusable plastic plates.

And then there's the wood issue. Good barbecue requires a lot of wood burning, which contributes to raising carbon emissions. All of this piles up to make barbecue restaurants pretty wasteful. Those of us who love it and also wish to live lightly on the planet just have to put blinders on. It does make me grateful for the few places that do little things to cut the waste. Coincidentally, two of my favorite places—Mr. BBQ in Grand Rivers and Mama Lou's in Uno—don’t use much Styrofoam. Mr. BBQ eat-in meals come served on washable plastic plates; Mama Lou's uses paper plates that, at least, can be composted. Both use reusable stainless steel flatware instead of plastic forks. At Hammerheads in Louisville, the clamshell takeaway box was made from a compostable cardboard. I appreciate these touches of conservation.

How to Use This Book, and a Personal Note

Read it cover to cover, savoring every delectable, well-crafted sentence.

But seriously, I envision this book as an introduction to Kentucky’s barbecue traditions and as a handy travel guide to steer you toward the best mom-and-pop smoked-meat destinations in the Commonwealth. Of course, I’d be delighted to meet someone who said, “Professor Porkbelly, I cracked the cover of your book on Kentucky barbecue before bed one night, and your book was so daggum interesting I stayed up until sunrise finishing it!”—but I expect this is a book most will dip into when traveling to certain regions of the state and hoping to score some great barbecue, or maybe—and I encourage this—to plan special barbecue road trips while the petroleum lasts.

At best, I hope this book kindles some long-overdue interest in the rich barbecue lore of Kentucky and drives some business toward these mom-and-pop places. We’re fortunate to still have one-of-a-kind family businesses surviving in these days of corporate box stores and cooker-cutter chains. Every nonchain barbecue joint holds the potential for a singular experience. I still get excited when eating at new places and revisiting favorite haunts. I might try a new food or hear a new story.
And I hope you enjoy these stories about the characters from the barbecue trail: people like Red Seavers of Southern Red’s in Pilot Oak, who traps (and sometimes barbecues) wild animals as a sideline job; and Cy and Jan Quarles, the sweetheart barbecue team of Mr. BBQ & More in Grand Rivers, still smokin’ after all of these years; and “Jewish redneck” Eric Gould of Smoketown USA, tending his smoking pits in overalls and spouting philosophy; and the wonderful Wormie—maybe the most colorful character from my barbecue tripping—carrying his shovels full of hickory coals to his grilling pits, cigarette tucked behind his ear, telling me about the delights of pickled bologna and his support of the troops.

While writing about barbecue, sometimes personal stories leaked in—anecdotes about raising pigs, for instance.

Which goes to say: this is an intensely personal book, peppered with idiosyncratic biases, from sense of humor to speech patterns to slaw preferences. I suppose all food writing is subjective, and it seems to me my first stab at it is overwhelmingly so, as I haven’t censored myself too much. Mostly I’ve written from the gut and the head, like I talk. That might charm you or irritate you. I hope more of the former.

As for food biases, I’ve already mentioned them above in the section “What I’ve Learned about Smoked Meats from the Barbecue Trail,” but I’ll try summarizing them here. Overwhelmingly, I favor savory over sweet, preferring potato salads with dill pickles rather than sweet ones, vinegar slaw over mayonnaise slaw, and real mayonnaise over Miracle Whip.

**On Preferred Cuts and Tenderness**

I confused a reviewer of this manuscript with my assessments of ribs. She asked me to clarify. “So, Wes, how do you really like your ribs?” Well, my favorite cut is the St. Louis–style spare rib, cut from the belly side of the rib cage, which has more fat (and flavor) than baby back ribs, trimmed of the tips. I like these because tips sometimes dry out quicker than the rest of the rib. Trimming the tips helps with even cooking. I also prefer dry-rubbed (spice-dusted) or naked (unsauced) ribs. When done, the meat should cling
to the bone but pull off easily. If meat “falls off the bone,” it’s overcooked. Wrapping ribs in foil during cooking creates a steaming process that makes ribs very tender, but I dislike the “oven-baked” texture and flavor that often results from steamed ribs. Same with beef brisket, which can taste like roast beef instead of barbecue after lengthy wrapping and steaming. If pit masters succeed in tenderizing the meats by cooking low and slow without the use of wrapping, I congratulate them. It’s my preferred method. Of course, I realize many people love ribs that require minimal chewing.

In a nutshell, I love richly smoked, tender meats, naked off the pit. Heavily sauced and overcooked ( mushy) barbecue turns me off. But on most days I’d choose mushy barbecue over a fast-food burger.

**BBQ, Bar-B-Q, Bar-B-Que, or Barbecue?**

The multiple spellings of *barbecue* in this book are intentional. It’s been a pain in the butt, but I’ve tried to remain true to the terms used by individual barbecue places on their menus and business cards. Sometimes a joint will use various spellings on the same menu, which makes consistency particularly difficult. In short, I’m just halfway confused, not entirely.

**Dialect and the Kentucky Twang**

I’ve used a bit of dialect in this book when trying to authentically re-create conversations I’ve had with barbecue people throughout the state. I’m not making fun of them. Hell, I love the way my people talk, our colorful flourishes and flexibility with the Queen’s English. Maybe you can hear some of it in my voice. I hope so. Nevertheless, I’ve mostly avoided—or weeded out—much of the local dialect I wrote into an early draft while trying to capture the particular Kentucky-fried talk of barbecue people across the state. Written dialect can get annoying and appear condescending, after all. If you find some, it’s just because I personally find that some particular “Kentuckyisms” like ’em and ye help convey dialect without greatly complicating the flow of reading.
And the best barbecue in Kentucky award goes to . . .

Don’t you want to know? People ask me time and again, “Who’s the best?” and I have to disappoint them. I could probably give you a Top 20 list, but then I’d agonize over #21, which nearly made the cut. Near the end of this book, I do include a subjective listing of superlatives, a kind of “greatest hits” of my barbecue travels, titled “Wes’s Great Kentucky Barbecue Feast: Favorite Dishes from My Travels.”

When I started this book, I considered a rating system similar to the one used by the authors of Real Barbecue, a scale of “good,” “real good,” and “as good as I’ve ever had.” I like this clear, direct language, and you’ll find it creeping into my reviews, especially the ones I wrote early on, but I intentionally left off a rating system because I want you to read about these places and decide for yourself where you’d like to visit. I think you’ll know when a place is awesome from the words I use to describe it.

When people ask me to name the best, I usually say something like, “It depends on what kind of meat you want,” because few places do everything at an excellent level. I might rate the half chicken at a particular restaurant as outstanding, for instance, but find the pulled pork too dry or lacking the smokiness I prefer. Or maybe a restaurant does stellar smoked meats but serves food-service potato salad and slaw. There are a few dear places that impressed me across the board, with quality smoky meats, fresh-tasting homemade sides, and good hospitality. You’ll know these when you read about them. I don’t try to temper my enthusiasm for these mom-and-pop barbecue wonderlands.

The Caveat That Must Be Written

And now I must make the disclaimer required of travel guides before sending you off into the blue yonder in search of good eats: call before you drive out of your way to get to a place. Or in these techie times, at least search the Internet to see if you can pull up recent food reviews. But calling is the safest bet.

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established places close and new places keep popping up. I’ve done my best to give you up-to-date reviews and descriptions. I wish all these mom-and-pop shops would survive through several generations. Patronize them and they’ll have a better chance. Give fast food the finger. Eat some love.

So Really, Let’s Move on Already!

That’s my introduction to Kentucky barbecue. I promise. I could yak on at length, but I’ll get to the places, because I imagine that’s why you cracked this book in the first place.

A note on how this book is set up: I’ve chosen a geographical orientation for the benefit of travelers. If you find yourself traveling in western Kentucky, for example, you can more easily locate a joint by such organization. For convenience, I’ve borrowed (stolen!) the terms used by the Kentucky Tourism Council to divide our 120-county state into sections.

And now for the good stuff.