

'CUE CURRICULUM

EVENTS & ATTRACTIONS A SPIT-SAVVY SYMPOSIUM FOR EGGHEADS AND CARNIVORES EXAMINES SOUTHERN LIFE THROUGH THE SPLINTERING PRISM OF BARBECUE. PABLEAUX JOHNSON GOES WHOLE HOG.

Memphis dry rubbed spare ribs. Beefy Texas hot links. Carolina pulled pork. To get a respectable sampling of American barbecue styles, a dedicated carnivore would need a few weeks of vacation time, a sauce-stained map, and enough hard driving stamina for a 12-state road trip.

But last October, more than 200 fanatics, scholars, food writers, legendary pit masters, and award-winning chefs got finger deep in barbecue food and lore at the Southern Foodways Alliance's (SFA) annual symposium at the University of Mississippi in Oxford.

Described by director John T. Edge as "a not altogether academic conference," the SFA's annual symposium explores the history and future of important regional foodways native to the South. The theme of the 2002 symposium—"Barbecue: Sauce, Smoke, and History"—celebrated the many-faced culture of American barbecue with a slow-smoked summit meeting of divergent barbecue traditions. In addition to panels and presentations on various quasi-scholarly topics—"Barbecue Sociology: The Meat of the Matter" or "A Southern Jewish Perspective on Barbecue"—the symposium also showcased old-style barbecue masters and inventive chefs adapting these regional styles to the contemporary world of fine dining.

"Barbecue is perhaps the sexiest Southern food," says Edge, "and as scholar John Shelton Reed [University of North Carolina sociologist] puts it, 'Barbecue is the closet thing Americans have to the wines and cheeses of France—drive 50 miles and everything changes.'"

"The SFA Symposium has become a tent meeting for true believers of Southern food, boot camp for chefs who interpret Southern food, and often a rollicking debauch for all involved," Edge continues. "But just as important, it's a showcase for strong scholarship presented in a way that's heavy on the humanity and accessible to nonacademics."

And far from being a self-congratulatory recipe swap, the symposium explored such contentious issues as race, ethnicity, and identity in the modern South. For instance, Robb Walsh, Houston-based journalist and author of *Legends of Texas Barbecue Cookbook*, discussed how his state's best-known barbecue myths—those of the cowboy and the German meat market—dominated the minds



Belle of the barbecue: In a prewar sequence of *Gone with the Wind*, a flirtatious Scarlett O'Hara enjoys Southern bites with an onslaught of beaux. Copyright © 1939 Turner Entertainment Co., an AOL Time Warner Company. All Rights Reserved.

and work of food writers, while the contributions of Mexican-American and African-American practitioners have been largely ignored. "There's a real examination of the larger issues here that sees the Southern context as more diverse than just Texas cowboys or black and white Protestants," says Lolis Eric Elie, a New Orleans *Times-Picayune* columnist and the maker of the film *Smokestack Lightning: A Day in the Life of Barbecue*.

When the attendees weren't discussing the influence of barbecue on Southern politics, they nibbled on smoked Cornish game hens from Memphis' *Cozy Corner*. As *New Yorker* standby Calvin Trillin riffed on his Kansas City barbecue boyhood, the audience savored recent memories of pulled pork and hoecake sandwiches or tempura-like deep-fried spare ribs.

In between sessions, noted chefs such as Anne Cashion (*Cashion's Eat Place* and *Johnny's Half Shell*, Washington, D.C.), Susan Goss (*West Town Tavern*, Chicago), and Ken Smith (*Upperline*, New Orleans) provided their own specialties for the appreciative crowds. Other back-of-the-house notables in attendance included Ken Callaghan and Michael Romano (Blue



Bringing Southern 'cue north: Danny Meyer turned Manhattan's 27th Street in front of his Blue Smoke restaurant into a celebration of barbecue lore at the first annual Big Apple BBQ Block Party the last weekend in May. An estimated 3,500 New Yorkers sampled ribs and pulled pork cooked by champion pitmasters, listened to jazz, and attended seminars debating regional barbecue styles. Legendary pitmaster Mike Mills of Memphis Championship Barbecue (above, center) paused from serving 2,275 pounds of ribs to chat with Michael Romano and Ken Callaghan. Below: The Mitchell Brothers—Aubrey, Ed, and Stevie—slow cooked 20 whole hogs over hickory and oak in six portable barbecue pits they trucked up in their semi from Wilson, North Carolina.

Smoke and Union Square Cafe, NYC, respectively), Hoover Alexander (*Hoover's*, Austin, TX), John Currence (*City Grocery*, Oxford, MS), and Ben Barker (*Magnolia Grill*, Durham, NC), who, in the conference center's makeshift kitchen, whipped up "mother's love" pork cheeks for the Saturday luncheon. Barker rubbed the pork morsels with a peppery spice mix, smoked them over hardwood coals, seared them on a grill, and then braised them to a falling-apart tenderness. "Tender as a mother's love," Barker calls the dish. The pork was teamed with pork confit and a flavorful Brunswick stew salad, an updated variation of a stewed vegetable side dish that included tender baby lima beans, sweet corn, roasted tomatoes, and diced rabbit. The pork and salad were topped with an aromatic Bourbon fortified "barbecue" jus.

Across town in a neighborhood park, E. R. "Mitch" Mitchell of Wilson, North Carolina, prepared two pigs in the traditional "whole hog" manner—split snout to tail and slow smoked over smoldering hickory coals. The barrel-shaped steel pit belched a fragrant fog into the shower-damp air as Mitchell rubbed the pig's crisping skin with a thin eastern Carolina pepper/vinegar sauce. After hours of smoking on the pit, the meat was finely chopped, sponged with the sauce, mixed with shreds of crisped pork skin, and served as part of the symposium's closing meal—the rain-pelted Barbecue Showdown.

The conference routinely features a theme-appropriate competition, an event that showcases regionally distinct styles. This year's curtain closer pitted Mitchell against Jimmy Hagood's South Carolina championship pork ribs and the definitely nontraditional smoked chicken from Big Bob Gibson's Bar-B-Q of Decatur, Alabama. Big Bob slathers his birds with a pale, mayonnaise-based sauce tangy with vinegar and spiked liberally with black pepper. After a soaked but sated crowd gorged on the different offerings, the traditional tie was declared. The true winners were the well-fed crowd who braved the rain for a taste of the South's sexiest specialty.

Many of the conference's honored pitmasters may be the last of their breed, threatened by modernization and new technologies, such as oxymoronic gas smokers and other changes, that make the old barbecue ways either prohibitively expensive or highly regulated by modern urban fire codes. "I just hope that people who do it the traditional way will survive," says Barker. "Every year there are fewer and fewer folks who're cooking on wood, so it's good that families still want to preserve the old ways. It's a part of our culture in North Carolina, and it's scary to think that it's something our children might not be able to taste."

"It was great to see folks so focused on their craft," notes Callaghan. "All these masters were there for a common cause—to talk about their style of barbecue and how they run their businesses. Everybody was talking shop. I got a lot of insight from these guys, and now I'm trying to apply it to my own kitchen. For one, after talking to Van Sykes [Bob Sykes BarBQs, Bessemer, AL], I now smoke my pork butts over a mix of hickory and apple woods rather than all hickory. They come out with a richer smoke, and the apple adds a sweet flavor to the meat."

After three days of considering the past, present, and future of this distinctly American cuisine, many attendees left grateful for the chance to cover so much culinary ground in a single weekend. Others found a new appreciation for barbecue joints not far from home. After Barker finished his luncheon duties, he pigged out on a heroic amount of Mitchell's spicy pork.

"Mitchell's is the definitive eastern Carolina style, and it's got a righteous punch," Barker enthuses. "I stood there in the rain and ate about two and a half pounds. Once I took my first bite, I just couldn't stop."

Pableaux Johnson is a New Orleans-based food and travel writer. He is the author of Lonely Planet's *World Food New Orleans* and is currently at work on a book about the Crescent City's fabled neighborhood restaurants.

