

Is New York Finally Becoming a Serious Barbecue City?

All it takes is passion, time, and wood smoke

by Nick Solares, June 13, 2016

Here's the truth: Until a decade ago, New York wasn't much of a barbecue town. There were chainlets and upscale theme spots, and one or two serious restaurants that stood out from the crowd, but there was no real barbecue culture. There was wood smoke, but there was no soul. Anyone who has visited the major meat-smoking regions of Tennessee, Kansas City, the Carolinas, and Central Texas will tell you that barbecue restaurants are social and communal in ways that few other culinary establishments are. Of course, the barbecue experience is ostensibly about eating smoked meat. But it also has deeper cultural implications — both because its origins lie in the celebratory feast, and because the food reflects the place where it's served.



Clearly there is currency for authentic wood-smoked barbecue in NYC, but Manhattan real estate prices and environmental regulations make life difficult for restaurants that want to cook with live fire. This serves to stymie innovation, as investors will invariably opt for an established model over something revolutionary but unproven. And it makes it difficult for a distinct style to emerge. It is thus not surprising that the epicenter of barbecue has shifted from Manhattan and is now firmly in Brooklyn, with its cheaper real estate and less stringent regulations, as well as an increasingly receptive marketplace. Most new barbecue restaurants in Manhattan tend to be spinoffs of previously successful establishments.

But out in Brooklyn, visible through the throng of pit smoke emanating from the borough, we begin to see a distinct form taking hold, the rudiments of a barbecue culture all its own. This form is not so much a specific method of cooking — although we are talking exclusively about wood-fired, slow-smoked meats — or a devotion to a particular regional style, although there is certainly that too.

Brooklyn barbecue displays a particular aesthetic in terms of interior design — stripped down, industrial spaces that often contain distressed wood, wrought iron, and Edison bulbs. Where meat is concerned, Brooklyn barbecue tends toward dense, dark rubs and heavy smoke penetration, along with cuts that are fatty and flavorful. High quality, often rare and heritage breed meat is another defining trait of this new school barbecue.

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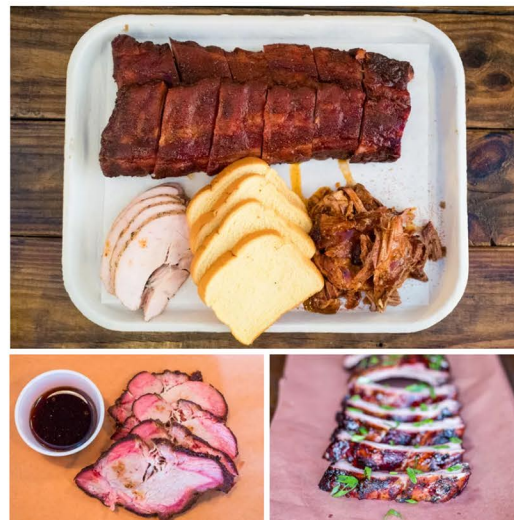
(tattooing, American roots music, graffiti, et al). In many ways, Brooklyn barbecue is part of a larger cultural movement.

The template for this type of restaurant was struck by *Fette Sau* almost a decade ago, and in the last five or so years, Kings County has become ground zero for barbecue in NYC. We have seen numerous barbecue joints open in recent years like *Hometown Bar-B-Que*, Fletcher's Brooklyn Barbecue, *Beast of Bourbon*, *Mable's Smokehouse*, and *Pig Beach*. Even big time Manhattan players *Hill Country* and *Dinosaur* opened up outposts in Brooklyn over the last few years.

But putting these two restaurant groups aside, Brooklyn barbecue has another defining feature: It is largely run by individuals, and in many cases novices, rather than corporations or seasoned professionals. In fact, NYC barbecue in general has followed an inverse trajectory to that of barbecue in much of the rest of country by initially hinging on large, ambitious establishments and then proliferating amongst individual entrepreneurs and enthusiasts.

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The trend of replicating different regional styles persists with restaurants like *Brisket Town* (Central Texas) and *Arrogant Swine* (North and South Carolina). Even here we find innovation: Tyson Ho at *Arrogant Swine* has created a form of Western North Carolina-style chopped pork shoulder that rivals Kansas City burnt ends (which use beef) in eliciting flavor. And if Ho's contribution is pushing boundaries, other innovations happening in Brooklyn pits could be genre-defining. Take Bill Durney's ribs at *Hometown*. He offers them both with a sweet and tangy Korean sticky sauce, or a fiery Jamaican jerk rub, drawing on the melting pot of cuisines in NYC and imbuing his barbecue with the local flavor.



Pig Beach, Fletcher's char sui pork, Hometown jerk ribs.

Elsewhere in NYC, you'll find Hugh Mangum smoking sous-vide pork cheeks at *Mighty Quinn's*, Matt Fisher serving char sui pork at Fletcher's, and Nester Laracuente slicing up barbecued pork belly at *Beast of Bourbon*. It is perhaps no coincidence that many of the players have fine dining backgrounds. The chefs manning the smokers at *Pig Beach* are Balthazar's Shane McBride and *Del Posto* veteran Matt Abadoo. Mangum and Ho also spent time in the kitchens of upscale restaurants before firing up the smokers.

It is thus fair to conclude that the state of American wood-smoked barbecue in NYC is healthy, vibrant, and growing exponentially. This growth is well illustrated by the fact that when the *Big Apple Barbecue Block Party* started back in 2002, the number of visiting barbecue establishments dwarfed the number of restaurants cooking with wood in the entire city. This is no longer the case: There are well over 25 restaurants smoking meat with wood in NYC these days, and more are on the way.

Part and parcel with the barbecue boom is a growing sense of community within the restaurants, as customers become regulars and they develop bonds and build friendships and memories within the smoky confines of NYC's barbecue joints. This, as much or maybe even more than the technique of smoking meat, is what defines barbecue culture.

It seems unlikely that the market can sustain the rapid rate of growth of the last half decade, and certainly there have been some casualties — *R.U.B.*, *Wildwood*, *Bone Lick Park*, *Neely's*, and *The Shed* have all shuttered in the last few years, the latter two establishments in the last few months. But conversely we have new joints opening with some frequency, and the likes of *Dinosaur*, *Hill Country*, *Mighty Quinn's*, and *Blue Smoke* branching out and becoming barbecue mini-chains. There is also continued innovation and adaptation, and not just in the new school joints. *Blue Smoke*, for example, which under Kenny Callaghan had a seemingly immutable menu, has now been radically transformed under chef Jean Paul Bourgeois. And even *Hill Country* recently added pulled pork to the menu, something that was anathema to its doctrinaire homage to Texas barbecue when it first opened. But it makes sense, according to owner Marc Glosserman, as many places in Texas now offer the dish.

There's clearly a robust and growing market for real, wood-smoked barbecue in New York City, and that demand is at last moving us toward a defined style of our own. Someday, this city may take its place in the pantheon of barbecue greatness. How do we get there? Keep on smoking. ■