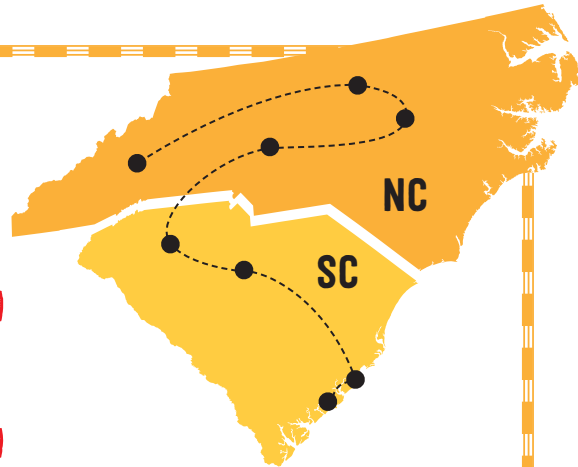


A Carolina BARBECUE

Road Trip

Come along to taste some of America's tastiest 'cue.

BY MONICA MICHAEL WILLIS



When someone from North or South Carolina says “barbecue,” they usually mean pork—as in, pork shoulders or whole hogs smoked low and slow over hardwood until the meat is tender, smoky perfection. It’s serious business in the sister states, where talented pitmasters work their magic in rustic pits on rural back roads and at state-of-the-art smokehouses in urban centers. Back in the day, you could tell exactly what region you were in by the barbecue sauce on your pork sandwich, but those vinegar, tomato and mustard

lines have been largely blurred by a new generation of pitmasters who are raising the profile of this culinary art with reimagined entrées and sides.

For my pork odyssey, I consulted friends in the South and barbecue devotees everywhere. I visited eight restaurants in eight cities with my husband, James, and we traveled 800 miles. While we could have easily stayed focused on pulled pork, we made a point to move beyond the local specialty so we wouldn’t miss any tasty surprises.

Loaded Tater in Charleston, SC

RODNEY SCOTT'S WHOLE HOG BBQ

Rodney Scott smoked his first hog at his family's variety store in Hemingway, SC, when he was 11. He went on to become only the second pitmaster ever to win a James Beard Award. He's famous for his whole-hog barbecue mopped with pepper-vinegar sauce, and at Rodney's sunny counter-service joint in Charleston, we tried it several ways. I especially loved the smoky pork tucked into a baked potato with cheddar, bacon, scallions and barbecue sauce. The slightly sweet baked beans and peppery collards are also first-rate. And I finished every last bit of Ella's Banana Puddin', made from his mom's recipe. rodneyscottsbbq.com



PIT STOP! After you feast, explore Charleston's historic district—one of the nation's largest and loveliest—on a fat-tire electric bike. \$39 for two hours; rebellionroads.com



BBQ Platter in Mount Pleasant, SC

SWIG & SWINE

The \$68 family platter here is a serious sampler: a tray loaded with thick slices of pork belly, beef brisket, smoked turkey, pulled pork, sausages, ribs, chicken wings and a choice of three of the available 11 sides, including béchamel mac 'n' cheese and pickled vegetables. We went for it, with no regrets. Like other traditionalists, pitmaster Anthony DiBernardo's barbecue technique involves no electricity, gas or pretense—just the kind of woody flavor you get from hours and hours of cooking over smoldering wood. Despite the lavish spread, we couldn't resist the warm pork rinds topped with hot sauce and crumbled blue cheese. swigandswinebbq.com

SCOTT: PETER FRANK EDWARDS/REDUX; DIBERNARDO: JONATHAN BONCEK; MONICA MICHAEL WILLIS (5)

Pork Nachos

in Irmo, SC

ROY'S GRILLE

The only way to enjoy chef Chris Williams's smoky pork in the past was to join the line outside his sliver of a restaurant at a gas station. Now Williams serves it up in a spacious new location in Irmo, a suburb of Columbia. While you can't go wrong with the South Carolina native's pork spare ribs, beef brisket or potato salad with peppery dry-cured bacon, the loaded nachos are a fan favorite. They're a combo of freshly fried, barbecue-spiced tortilla chips with pulled pork (or blackened chicken), queso blanco and a choice of five barbecue sauces, including tomatoey Sweet Sassy Red or Ole Gold, a tangier rendition made with mustard. Try 'em both! roysgrillesc.com



Dry-Rubbed Ribs

in Greenville, SC

HENRY'S SMOKEHOUSE

The heady smell of hickory hits you as soon as you open the door of this cozy wood-paneled joint, a Greenville go-to since 1991. The menu, printed on a giant chalkboard above the counter, hasn't changed much in three decades—and that's a good thing. Manager and pitmaster Billy Bindewald is usually on site serving racks of ribs with a garlicky pepper crust. You can douse them with the house spicy mustard sauce or the sweeter tomato-based barbecue sauce on every table. The barbecue hash with bits of smoked pork was a memorable side. Split some hand-cut fries if you have room, and don't be fooled by the sweet potato casserole billed as a veggie: It doubles as dessert. henrysmokehouse.com



Chopped Pork Shoulder

in *Lexington, NC*

LEXINGTON BARBECUE

In a small city that has 13 barbecue restaurants, a packed parking lot is a very good sign. You'll often find owner Rick Monk and his brother-in-law Keith "Bub" Wright greeting customers and taking orders behind the counter of the 1962 landmark. They smoke 6,000 pounds of pork shoulder a week and make their slaw and barbecue sauce—known around here as "dip"—with ketchup, a longtime local tradition. We took Wright's advice and got a heaping plate of chopped pork flecked with charred bits, which came with fries. My chaser: a pork-skin sandwich (file under: when in Lexington!). lexbbq.com



PIT STOP! Browse hundreds of old-fashioned sweets at The Candy Factory in downtown Lexington. Don't miss the Red Bird Peppermint Puffs, made locally since 1890. lexingtoncandyfactory.com



Barbecue Sandwich

in *Raleigh, NC*

SAM JONES WHOLE HOG BBQ

Sam Jones is third-generation BBQ royalty; he's the grandson of Pete Jones, who opened the legendary Skylight Inn BBQ in Ayden, NC, in 1947. Sam leaves his hogs over smoldering wood overnight on the grill, then fires up the heat in the morning to crisp them. I ordered the Pete Jones, a wonder of a sandwich that pairs chopped hickory-smoked pork with vinegary slaw on a soft potato bun. Adding a side of the warm homemade potato chips is optional but highly recommended. samjonesbbq.com



Brunswick Stew

in Durham, NC

PICNIC

Here in North Carolina's hip college town, Chris Holloway smokes hogs for close to a day in a smokehouse behind his restaurant. He uses white oak, which gives his pork a lighter, more delicate smoky flavor than hickory. I had a Cheerwine slushie (booze optional) before digging into the Brunswick stew, a comforting mishmash that includes pork broth, corn, tomatoes, lima beans and smoked bits of pork and brisket. But oh, the hush puppies! Unlike some places where they're an afterthought, Picnic's are soft and flaky, with a hint of onion and just the right amount of cornmeal crunch. We polished off a basketful, then came back the next day for more. picnicdurham.com



PICNIC'S HUSH PUPPIES

Combine 2 cups self-rising corn meal, $\frac{1}{4}$ cup flour and 1 teaspoon kosher salt in a medium bowl. Fold in $\frac{3}{4}$ cup finely minced onion and $1\frac{1}{4}$ cups warm water; let the batter rest 30 minutes. Heat 2 inches vegetable oil to 375° in a heavy pot or deep cast-iron skillet. Fry dollops of batter until dark golden brown, 2 to 3 minutes. Remove with a slotted spoon and drain on a paper towel-lined plate. Serve warm with hot sauce.



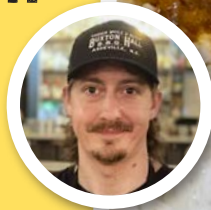
PIT STOP! Rack up steps on your pedometer exploring the 55-acre Sarah P. Duke Gardens on the campus of Duke University; admission is free. gardens.duke.edu

Barbecue Hash & Sausage

in Asheville, NC

BUXTON HALL BAR-B-CUE

This spot, housed in a former 1930s roller rink, is run by executive chef Nick Barr, who butchers and smokes pasture-raised hogs on site. While his pulled pork is among the best of the best, I'd been advised to try the barbecue hash and smoked sausage plate, both of which make delicious use of some lesser-known bits of pig. It came with corn pudding. We could have happily stopped there, but the banana pudding pie with toasted brown sugar meringue was calling. Like other Buxton Hall offerings, it was an elevated take on a barbecue staple—and a sweet ending to our eating adventure. buxtonhall.com



PIT STOP! Take the mother of all house tours at Asheville's Biltmore House, a 250-room manse built in 1895. The estate's gardens include roses from around the world. biltmore.com

Where to Stay



Charleston, SC **FULTON LANE INN**

Tucked off busy Market Street, the inn has 45 cozy rooms and delivers free breakfast right to your door. From \$259 per night; fultonlaneinn.com



Greenville, SC **GRAND BOHEMIAN LODGE**

Guests at this chalet-style beauty enjoy views of a waterfall and luxe digs with rain showerheads. From \$349 per night; kesslercollection.com



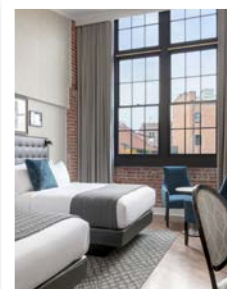
Raleigh, NC **HEIGHTS HOUSE HOTEL**

This restored 1860 Italianate mansion has nine stylish rooms, a painted-glass skylight and a swanky cocktail bar. From \$249 per night; heightshousenc.com



Durham, NC **21C MUSEUM HOTEL**

This hotel, housed in a historic art deco building, features fab decor, a spa and an art museum. From \$199 per night; 21cmuseumhotels.com



Asheville, NC **THE FOUNDRY HOTEL**

Exposed brick and large windows are part of the industrial charm. The boutique hotel was once a steel mill. From \$298 per night; foundryasheville.com

FULTON LANE INN: BRENNAN WESLEY; HEIGHTS HOUSE HOTEL: PHOTOGRAPHIEFOURSEVEN; 21C MUSEUM HOTEL: CHRIS COOPER; THE FOUNDRY HOTEL: JEREMIAH HULL; MONICA MICHAEL WILLIS (3)