

Food

Today's South Carolina barbecue is chef-inspired, upscale – and the future



By **Jim Shahin** Columnist, Food August 2 at 9:01 AM



The barbecue scene in Charleston, S.C., has heated up with the opening in June of Lewis Barbecue, by celebrity Texas pitmaster John Lewis. (Andrew Cebulka)

With apologies to Bruce Springsteen, I've seen the future of barbecue, and it is Charleston, S.C.






Historically, the so-called Holy City hasn't been a barbecue town. Recently, though, its barbecue scene has been on fire.

Besides adding a spate of new homegrown restaurants, the city has attracted the likes of celebrity Texas pitmaster John Lewis, who helped open Franklin Barbecue in Austin, hailed by Bon Appétit as the [best barbecue in America](#). His legendary brisket may compete with the nation's best whole hog if Rodney Scott, who operates an acclaimed pit in tiny Hemingway, S.C., closes a deal on a property he is considering at this writing.




It's hard to overstate what it would mean to have these two giants of barbecue, each an exemplar of a distinctive style, in the same city. They would add a couple of exclamation points to an already exclamatory barbecue scene. Indeed, the largely chef-driven experimentation here is changing what it means to talk about not only South Carolina barbecue, but barbecue, period.

[Rodney Scott says real barbecue is 'hands-on']

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Unlike with traditional central Texas or eastern North Carolina barbecue, it isn't easy to say exactly what South Carolina barbecue is. It's mustard sauce, yes. But it's also a thin pepper-vinegar sauce of the sort you find in eastern North Carolina. It's also a thickish tomato-based sauce. It's whole hog (a little, anyway). It is pork shoulder. It's a side dish of brown gravy (usually) made from pork called hash, generally served over rice. It's buffets.

Dolly in on Charleston and something else comes into focus: classically trained chefs, who are rejecting the mimicry common in other barbecue hot spots and are experimenting based on the regional low-country cuisine. Upscale barbecue is a nationwide trend, but nowhere else have I seen as much of it as I have here.

Charleston is a sort of Brooklyn on the Mid-Atlantic, a hipster haven, especially for foodies. James Beard Award-winning chef Sean Brock of Husk and McCrady's fame has put the city on the culinary map by revitalizing Southern cuisine through a near-archaeological zeal for discovering lost foods, such as heirloom varieties of legumes and pork.

A pork-centric place

Brock's modern take infuses the city's barbecue scene as well. Johnson & Wales-trained executive chef Daniel Doyle of Poogan's Smokehouse, which opened in October, grew up in North Carolina, smoking hogs at family gatherings as a kid. "I'm a vinegar-pepper guy," he tells me, choosing sides in the great sauce debate.

Doyle doesn't serve beef brisket, partly as a statement of place (South Carolina is pork-centric) but also for personal reasons. "I can't make brisket as good as I can make pork," he says. "I'll let people who can really do it, do it. I only want to serve what I know I can make at the highest level."

Much of his approach reimagines traditional dishes, such as the Southern staple pimento cheese. Rather than serve it as a dip with crackers or in a sandwich, he borrows from the Italian rice ball arancini and turns it into a fried orb that spills an orange lava of molten pimento cheese when pierced. Delicious sliders mate the old (pulled pork) with the new (pork belly) and top it with what's billed as "Red Neck kimchee" (pickled spicy red cabbage) and a smear of Duke's mayonnaise on a sweet, mushy Hawaiian roll.

"I'm trying to find the middle spot between traditional and the



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chef stuff," Doyle says. "The best way to say it, we're chef-inspired barbecue. We threw out all the rules."



An assortment of meat and sides at Home Team Barbecue in Charleston. (Merideth Garrigan_A Spot in Time Photography)

A few blocks away, similar experimentation is occurring at Smoke BBQ. Roland Feldman, who co-owns the narrow, black-ceilinged restaurant with his brother Michael, cooked under James Beard Award-winning chef Jennifer Jansinski in Colorado before returning to his home town, where he started a barbecue truck and then opened Smoke in June 2015.

Feldman calls his spice-caked ribs, confit chicken wings, brisket-hash french fries and house-smoked pastrami "elevated barbecue." His arsenal includes brining, smoking, confiting, fermenting and flash-frying. "We're marrying technique to soul," he says.

He offers two house-made sauces, one based on mustard and the other on ketchup that is made in-house. He smokes the brisket for upward of 18 hours and bastes it in a concentration of drippings from all the meats just before serving. His pork butt is seasoned with a complex spice rub that includes ancho and guajillo chilies. He gives the hash a twist by serving it over locally milled grits rather than rice. Says Feldman, "this is what we call Charleston-style barbecue."

[America's Best Food Cities: Charleston, S.C.; the 10 best food cities in America, ranked]

Charleston barbecue used to be primarily Midlands-style mustard-sauce South Carolina barbecue. You can still find the mustard-sauce pork and basic hash and rice at places such as Melvin's Barbecue, just outside town in Mount Pleasant.

"We can't really come out with new items," says owner David Bessinger of the Bessinger clan, one of the two leading families

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Bessinger of the Bessinger clan, one of the two leading families of South Carolina barbecue, along with the Dukes. "People don't want it. All these chefs opening these barbecue restaurants, it hasn't hurt me. Different clientele."

Still, Bessinger made a change in his cooking method last year. "I have started to go back to the way my granddaddy did it," he says, referring to all-wood, no-gas smoking. He's skipping the traditional pit, though, and using all-wood smokers.

At Cumberland Smokehouse, co-owner and pitmaster Kyle Yarbrough uses an all-wood smoker custom-built by a local fabrication company, which may explain why his pork and ribs are so full-flavored. "I like when they've been smoked, not when they've been baked in the oven," he says, which could be read as a subtle dig at the gas-assist-smoker guys.

Yarbrough, who makes mustard-based, thick ketchup-based and vinegar-pepper sauces, sees the Charleston market as simultaneously crowded and wide-open.

"Charleston is saturated with barbecue restaurants," he says. "But I think it just means more business for all of us."

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The prized red smoke ring marks a brisket at Lewis Barbecue. (Andrew Cebulka)

Texas comes to town

Competition is about to become more heated, though, thanks to renowned Texas pitmaster John Lewis.

Lewis decided to move to Charleston after attending a fundraising event here in 2014. "I thought this place was really cool," he says. "I came back three weeks later."

After launching 14 wildly popular pop-ups over the past year, Lewis opened a much-anticipated restaurant in late June called (what else?) Lewis Barbecue.

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I ask him how his Texas approach would fit into the South Carolina scene. Barbecue here “seems to be about the sauce,” he says. “And it’s like, ‘Who cares?’ ”

He says sauce will be available on the condiments table. “All the meat will come unsauced,” he says.

“Texas barbecue,” I say.

“I don’t know if I would call it Texas barbecue,” Lewis replies. “I would just call it good barbecue. More juicy. More flavorful. More tender. I just feel it’s my barbecue.”

The menu features the Lone Star State’s meat trilogy: brisket, Texas-style mildly spicy beef sausage (called “hot guts”) and pork ribs. It also has pulled pork. The sides include the requisite Texas pinto beans, but the coleslaw is lemony — decidedly non-Texan — and there is a green bean salad and a green chili corn pudding, stateless offerings.

Lewis designed and built the four 3,500-pound propane tank offset smokers, which allow him to smoke up to 4,800 pounds of brisket at a time. He built a separate sausage cooker that can smoke 1,600 links.

Clearly, he’s preparing for success.



Home Team Barbecue operates several outlets around Charleston. (Merideth Garrigan_A Spot in Time Photography)

Home Team BBQ isn’t scared. Earlier this year, the local chain opened a downtown location, the most recent of three outlets, less than a block from Lewis Barbecue.

The current generation of barbecue restaurateurs owes a debt of gratitude to Home Team’s chef and co-owner Aaron Siegel, a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America. His sensibility helped unmoor the area’s barbecue not only from its Midlands roots (such as they were) but also from mimicry of other

regions.

I checked out the downtown location on a Sunday afternoon and found myself slack-jawed at the throng. Customers, most in their 20s and 30s, sipped cocktails on the front patio or in the side yard while waiting at least an hour to cram in next to someone at one of the communal tables. "It's like this all the time," the hostess told me.

'We're not worried'

I was there to meet Robert Moss, the barbecue editor for Southern Living magazine and an author of two books on barbecue.

"This restaurant," he said as we plowed our way through much of the menu, "is a direct descendant of Husk. It's fine dining going downscale."

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The crackly, fantastic fried chicken skins make Moss's point for him, as they are one of Sean Brock's famous dishes. The delicious pork cake, surrounded by salad greens and field peas, could, with little adjustment, find itself on the menu of a much pricier restaurant. The pork ribs are smoky with a lovely black crust, the pulled pork a flavorful tangle of moist strands.

And it's all being done with wood. There's a wood-only J&R smoker for the pork shoulder, a fancy GrillWorks grill for burgers and vegetables, and a big Lang offset for the brisket. Yes, they do brisket. It's not bad, either. Just their luck to be situated practically next door to one of the greatest brisket smokers in America.

"We're not worried" about Lewis Barbecue, said Home Team's director of operations, John Keevil. "We do different things. We elevate it a little bit, but also offer things that are tangential but work with barbecue. We have a legitimate wine list. This restaurant is reflective of where it is."

And where that is, is Charleston.

Shahin is an associate professor of journalism at Syracuse University. He will join Wednesday's Free Range chat at noon: live.washingtonpost.com. Follow him on Twitter: [@jimshahin](https://twitter.com/jimshahin).

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By **Jim Shahin** August 2



Dinner is in progress at Home Team Barbecue in Charleston, S.C. (Merideth Garrigan_A Spot in Time Photography)

Charleston:

Home Team BBQ, three locations in the Charleston area. Get the addictive chicken cracklins, the crispy pork cake and the creative chopped-brisket taco. hometeambbq.com.

Swig and Swine Authentic BBQ, 1217 Savannah Hwy. Get the succulent and smoky beef brisket, the smoked pork belly and the pork rinds with Tabasco honey and blue cheese. 843-225-3805; swigandswinebbq.com.

Cumberland St. Smokehouse, 5 Cumberland St. Get the Benton's country ham spread, duck fat fries, chicken wings, luscious pulled pork. 843-641-0131; cumberlandsmokehouse.com.

Bessinger's BBQ, 1602 Savannah Hwy. Casual, family-style restaurant, Midlands style (mustard sauce). Get the mustard-sauced pulled pork sandwich and house-made onion rings. 843-556-1354, bessingersbbq.com.

Melvin's, two locations, Charleston area. Homey, comfortable; Midlands style. Get the double cheeseburger. 843-762-0511. melvinsbbq.com.

Dukes BBQ, 331 Folly Rd. Unpretentious workingman's spot

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with a large buffet; Midlands style. Get the crunchy-skinned, moist fried chicken, fried okra. 843-789-4801; *no website*.

Queology, 32-C North Market St. Get the BBQ pork tacos. 843-580-2244; queology.com.

Smoke BBQ, 487 King St. Hipster casual, with live music on weekend nights. Get the crispy, juicy wings and the tangy Smoke salad. 843-805-5050; smokebbq.kitchen.

Lewis Barbecue, 464 N. Nassau St. Texas-modern: spacious, high slatted wood ceiling, concrete floor, outdoor seating with a view of the giant John Lewis-made offset smokers. It wasn't open when I visited, but I've eaten Lewis's food before and can recommend without reservation his brisket and beef short ribs. 843-805-9500; lewisbarbecue.com.

Poogan's Smokehouse, 188 E. Bay St. Spacious, nouveau-barn vibe. Get the sinful pimento cheese fritters with smoked tomato bacon jam, the zesty pork belly/pulled pork sliders, the tender pork ribs and the hash with sunny-side-up egg. 843-577-5665; pooganssmokehouse.com.

Wise-Buck Smoked Meats, 23 Ann St. Rustic-industrial chic. Get the sharp provolone-studded sausage, the rich house-made liverwurst, the meaty pork ribs and the curried cauliflower. 843-306-0101; wise-buck.scarecrowandco.com.

Elsewhere in South Carolina:

Henry's Smokehouse, three locations in the Upstate, two in Greenville, one in Simpsonville. Bare-bones place where locals meet. Get the juicy pork, smoked over hickory coals in a double-door metal pit. henryssmokehouse.com.

Midway BBQ, 811 Main St., Buffalo. Sawdust on the floors. Established 1941. Get the velvety, creamy chicken stew and the hash. 864-427-4047; midwaybbq.com.

Cooper's Country Store, 6945 U.S. Hwy. 521, Salters. Takeout; a throwback to the early days of commercial barbecue. Get a zippy pulled pork sandwich and house-cured ham and bacon. 843-387-5772; *no website*.

Scott's Bar-B-Que, 2734 Hemingway Hwy., Hemingway. World class Pee Dee-style ember-cooked whole hog with a unique version of vinegar-pepper sauce in a two-table general store. Get the unsurpassed pulled pork sandwich (or plate) and skins



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on the hog, 843-558-0134. inescousbbq.com.

Jackie Hite's Bar-B-Que, 460 E. Railroad Ave., Leesville. Barebones eatery. Get the whole hog cooked over hickory embers, the smoke-infused full-bodied hash cooked in an iron kettle over a wood fire, and the brittle pork skins. 803-532-3354; *no website*.

Hite's Bar-B-Que, 250 Dreher Rd., West Columbia. Established 1957; meats cooked in a pit using hickory and oak wood. Get the delicious pork, hash and liver pudding. 803-794-4120. hitesbbq.com.

Carolina Bar-B-Que, 109 Main St., New Ellenton. A barbecue version of Garrison Keilor's Chatterbox Cafe, abuzz with townsfolk. Excellent buffet. Get the terrific pork, flavorful hash and crunchy hush puppy balls. 803-652-2919; *no website*.

Maurice's Piggie Park BBQ, 12 locations around Columbia. It's a chain, but its meats are slow-cooked in an all-wood pit, a rarity. Get the classic Midlands-style mustard-sauced pulled pork sandwich; 1-800-MAURICE; piggiepark.com.

The War Mouth, 1209 Franklin St., Columbia. Small, funky hipster joint with items like catfish pâté, deviled-crab-stuffed squash blossoms and crispy duck confit. Pasture-raised whole hog cooked over wood coals on weekends; I wasn't there on a weekend, so I missed the pig. Hash was good, though. 803-569-6144; thewarmouth.com.

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The Southern Belly BBQ, two locations around Columbia. Quirky sandwich shop, retro in a modern sort of way. Exotic sauces, custom toppings. Get the sumptuous, ridiculous pulled pork/Jack cheese/bacon/grilled onions/roasted peppers/jalapeños "barbecue unchained" D'jango Sammy. 803-667-9533; southernbellybbq.com.

Sweatman's BBQ, 1427 Eutaw Rd., Holly Hill. Whole hogs basted with mustard sauce while cooked over hardwood coals. I didn't eat there, but the place comes highly recommended by barbecue experts, including author and Southern Living barbecue editor Robert Moss, for its classic Midlands-style mustard-based pork. 803-496-1227; sweatmansbbq.com.

Cannon's BBQ & More, 1903 Nursery Rd., Little Mountain.

Thin, remarkable joint. Hash is cooked in an iron kettle over



...my, transhackle joint. Fish is cooked in an iron cauldron over hickory wood, like way back in the day. Order it. 803-945-1080; *no website.*

Shealy's Bar-B-Que, 340 East Columbia Ave., Leesville. Since 1969; giant eating hall with a huge buffet. Get the crispy, succulent fried chicken. 803-532-8135; shealysbbq.com.

— Jim Shahin

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Jim Shahin, who writes the monthly Smoke Signals column about barbecue and grilling, is an associate professor of journalism at Syracuse University. Follow @jimshahin



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