Barbie girl

Want a true taste of America? In the South, barbecue is more about hearts and minds than it is about meat, finds Alicia Miller
attesting to long, sleepless nights spent coddling pork shoulders as if they were newborns. Only a few moonshiners are needed for the judges, but each one must be perfect—one overcooked rib or under-sauced chicken thigh and the $10,000 (&£6,000) trophy money goes elsewhere. But far more important is the glory. Before I arrived in the South, 10 days ago, I wouldn’t have understood the fuss—it’s just meat, y’all. But now, 10 days wiser, after hitting a car and driving 1,000km across America’s barbecue belt, I’m happy to say that I was very, very wrong.

In the sleepy colonial corners of Charleston, South Carolina, where I begin, you can feel the ghosts. Grand plantations are scattered with ancient oak trees, so densely laden with well-like moss that they seem to be bowing with sadness. The southern sun shines brightly, even in October, although in the darker, haunted places, it cannot penetrate to burn off the morning mist. Charleston’s eerie, romantic Old Town—all rambling clapboard homes with Scarlett O’Hara verandas— is hemmed with the blue of the Atlantic Ocean. It feels as though it was once the centre of things, and now it’s the edge of the world, clinging on for dear life—which it does, when the hurricanes come. The modern side of town, like most modern sides of towns, is more functional, but it has its charms—such as stand-out barbecue.

‘This ain’t your usual barbecue joint,’ a very-faced local guy in a check shirt tells me, as I settle down next to him on the long wooden table dominating the car-wash-cum-smokeshouse Swig and Swine. ‘The chef isn’t from the South, so he misfires styles.’ He turns back to his pork-belly sandwich, and it’s not until a rectangular silver platter lands in front of me that I appreciate exactly what this means. South Carolinaan pulled pork alongside ➔

‘JUDGES, KEEP YOUR EYES OPEN FOR ILLEGAL GARNISHES. THERE SHOULD BE NO RED-TIPPED LETTUCE, NO KALE, AND FINGER-LICKIN’ IS STRICTLY PROHIBITED’
savoury, moist Texas-style brisket and thick-cut Memphis ribs – who knew barbecue could be so diverse? I serve myself a healthy ‘research’ portion and begin to survey the six-pack of sauces in front of me. My neighbour leans in again. ‘The traditional South Carolina style is pulled or chopped pork with mustard sauce. But don’t try using it in North Carolina or they’ll look at you funny – they like vinegar or tomato sauce instead.’

Then for the plunge: a tender piece of brisket, marbled with creamy, molten fat, imbued with smoke, ringed in a crisp, dark ‘bark’. It’s cow heaven. Rather ceremoniously, I fold upon the rest, and my neighbour chuckles. ‘Then there are the regional side dishes,’ he continues, pausing to let me wipe saucy blobs from my cheek. ‘Mac and cheese is everywhere, but Brunswick stew – made with pulled pork and vegetables – is only found in the Deep South, here and in Georgia.’

I wonder if I should be taking notes – I’ll probably need to know these things once I’m judging – but find myself reaching for a chunky rib instead. One nibble releases a burst of smoky, savoury richness, the firm exterior belying a decadent pull-apart texture. I have no idea what region this is from, and I don’t really care. If the South Carolinians don’t want it, I’ll claim it for the British camp. I spend the night tucked under creamy layers of blanket in my little downtown B&B, dreaming of meat.

So when I wake late the next morning, it’s a rush to tick off Charleston’s sights: the boxy colonial churches, with Declaration of Independence signatures buried beneath mossy gravestones; the quirky ‘museum houses’, 18th-century mansions frozen in time. Once I’m finally in the car zooming away from Charleston, I see beachy palmetto trees give out to harsher scrub along the Interstate. This is the stuff of proper American road-trip dreams: truckers cruise by in trucker hats, billboard signs pledge ‘Jesus is here to save my soul’ (just dial 1-800-FAITH. Charges may apply!), and billboards promising ‘world’s best barbecue’ litter the roadside, too.

By the time I reach gritty Durham, the industrial-chic seat of Duke University in North Carolina, the landscape has altered. It feels like another country. Among red-brickled former tobacco factories – this was once the jewel of the industry – craft-beer bars spill onto the street, artisan donut shops serve up bacon-bourbon-glazed masterpieces, and hipster butchers double as boutique bakeries. By contrast with Charleston’s timeless, this feels edgy and alive. Just the place for a barbecue crawl. I begin with a roadside joint, tucking in to super-moist turkey and spiced hush-puppies (cornmeal fritters like deep-fried clouds). Next it’s on to a swanky, modern place specialising in chopped pork, a slightly rougher, denser cut than the pulled-style I’ve had so far. Both are good.
but neither compares to Bullock’s Barbecue, which is squeezed in among these hip young things, and proudly open since 1952. 

‘Do you know,’ says creepy, 76-year-old Tommy Bullock, leaning forward in his brown banquette, ‘that you are in the cradle of barbecue?’ He explains how pilgrims used to cook pig along the North Carolina coastline, inventing the ‘whole hog’ style – where an entire pig is cooked for 12 hours or more over a constant wood fire. I watch the server unload bowls of chopped pork from her tray, eating it alongside the collard greens and hush-puppies that have already arrived on our table. ‘So that’s your imagination?’ I ask, starting a bit of everything onto my plate. The soft, slightly bitter greens are the perfect foil for Tommy’s vinegary pulled pork, so soft and finely strung it’s almostspreadable. Tommy wrinkles his brow. ‘No. My dad cooked this way, and barbecue is all about family.’

Be it a birth, a funeral, or just about anything important in between, Tommy explains, people here turn to pork. Each family has its own way of cooking a hog, and these flavors and memories are resurrected every time they get together. ‘That’s why,’ he says, ‘it’s why barbecue matters. Because blood is thicker than water.’ He leaves me with a banana-crum pie – a proper slice of retro nostalgia, just like this place, hasn’t changed a bit.

As I tick off the kilometres rolling west towards Asheville, this whole barbecue thing is clicking into place. It’s tribal – a Southern tradition, a regional tradition and a family one. There are as many different kinds of it as there are landscapes, and that would seem to be hundreds, I think, as the scenery through the windshield changes once more. The I-40 is becoming increasingly winding, cutting through a wooded landscape flecked with autumnal gossamers, russets and golds. Broad panoramas are whistled down as forest closes in, a reminder that I’m approaching the Blue Ridge Parkway, one of America’s greatest scenic drives. But that will have to wait. I’m due in pretty little Asheville, a city hidden among mountains that manages to feel both worldly and untouched. Visitors come mostly for grand Biltmore House – George Vanderbilt’s Versailles-esque estate is mind-boggling in its scale – but I prefer the quiet streets of galvanized Victorian homes; the quaint downtown of busy restaurants, cocktail bars and galleries, where hipster students and old ladies seem equally at home. Am I still in barbecue country? This doesn’t seem like that small, old-school smoking scene I was getting to know.

‘Barbecue is an art – it might seem simple, but it’s anything but,’ Elliot Moss tells me through thick-rimmed glasses, as he leads me over to his smoker. An award-winning fine-dining chef, who traded it all in to open a barbecue restaurant, he took five years to hone his craft. In the open-plan kitchen, I watch tonight’s hog being lifted from its smoker, the chefs – many from the country’s top restaurants – breaking it down. Each pig, sourced locally, has a name, and tonight Betsy is on the menu. ‘Every pig is individual and each one needs cooking a little different. Some are ready in 12 hours, some take 20. We’re also adjusting the heat in different places. And, of course, the wood makes a difference, too, whether it’s hickory, cherry or oak.’ This kind of dedication means Elliot often sleeps at the restaurant, but it’s worth it. I order an array of Betsy – some of her pillow-y pulled belly, her rich shoulder. She’s slightingly tender, with a zippy cinder vinegar cutting through the unctuous fattiness. It’s the best pork I’ve eaten, ever. It’s Michelin-starred quality, and yet it’s just pulled pork, nothing else. Elliot’s subtle cooking decisions have elevated smoke to something spiritual. For the first time, I can see that all those barbecue obsessions are banding on about – and I finally feel ready to become a judge. Three days later, via an overnight to Charlotte, I’m rolling in the judging tent in Lynchburg. I can’t move. Chicken, pork, ribs, brisket – I’ve eaten every disgustingly crafted mouthful, a kilo in total. And now, in the dusky aftermath, the teams are pouring in around me, faces worn with anxiety as they wonder who’s bagged first prize. Me, I’m remembering a moment earlier today, just after the chicken round, when I thought – out loud – that the sauce on the number three was over-seasoned. That made the old man with the sparkly eyes snap up his head and say, ‘Goddamn, you know your barbecue!’ The winning team can keep their $10,000 – my own Grand Championship moment was utterly priceless.

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Where to stay

King Charles Inn (001843737451), kingcharlesinn.com; doubles from £75, roomy rooms in Charleston’s historic district. In Asheville, the Bunn House (001828333700, bunnhouse.com; doubles from £150, B&B) is lovely. Suite in. In Charleston, try Bluff View Inn (0018007258338, bluffviewbnb.com; doubles from £160) and Anchorage from Lynchburg, Sheraton Nashville has a country-music theme (001615299000, nashvillesheraton.com; doubles from £152, room only). In Atlanta, try Johnny Mitchell’s (johnnymitcheinn.com; mains about £8).

Where to eat

Swig and Swine in Charleston has top Tenin barbecue swigandswine.com; mains about £15. In Durham, try Q Shack for smoked turkey, qshackncoriginal.com; mains about £7. In Bullock’s BBQ (bucklo书房bbq.com; mains about £7). In Asheville, Buxton Hall Barbecue does unpretentious Boulevardton.com; mains about £8, and Luke’s has BBQ tempeh, made from soy beans (lukesbbq.com; mains about £7). In Chattanooga get Memphis-styles ribs at Clyde’s On Main (clydesonsmain.com; mains about £8). In Atlanta, try Johnny Mitchell’s (johnnymitcheinn.com; mains about £8).

Go packaged

America As You Like It (020 8742 8299, americasyoulikeit.com) has an all-night Southern BBQ Trail for £135pp, including flights from London to Charleston, returning from Nashville, car hire and accommodation.

Further information

The Jack Daniel’s Irresistible (jackdaniels.com/bbl takes place in October at Stelvio, TBA), and is free. For more, see visitasheville.com.