

# SHOW-ME FLAVOR

RESTAURANTS, RECIPES, & CULINARY CULTURE



TO LEARN THE VALUE  
OF A CULTURE,  
CHECK THEIR *Barbecue.*

Perry Foster's Bar-B-Que in Warrensburg serves this Famous Combo Sandwich.

COURTESY OF RACHEL NELSON



# BBQ, BAR-B-Q BARBECUE

IT'S NOT HOW YOU SPELL IT; IT'S HOW YOU SPICE IT | By John Robinson

EATING  
*barbecue* AIN'T PRETTY.  
IT'S JUST good.

THE CREDIT CARD MACHINE kept disconnecting. I didn't have cash, or my checkbook. "No problem," said Perry Foster. "Mail me a check." Perry Foster's Bar-B-Que embodies all that is good about humankind: Trust, harmony, and world peace. Oh, and taste. My lunch was a combo sandwich, generously endowed with smoked ham, brisket, chicken, and burnt ends slathered with sauce, accompanied by a steering wheel-sized platter of homemade seasoned French fries. Perry and his cook laughed when I approached the sandwich with a knife and fork. "Your hands! Use your hands," the cook coached me. "Eating barbecue ain't pretty. It's just good."

Good? No, great.

A great barbecue joint goes beyond great food. Several hundred photos adorn the walls of Perry Foster's on the south side of Warrensburg, at the turnoff to Whiteman Air Force Base. Among visages of Kansas City Chiefs, cheerleaders, and Hank Williams Jr., Perry pointed to his favorite picture. "That's the commander of Whiteman," he said, "flanked by the two top generals in the Russian air force." All three were smiling. When the Russian generals reported the highlights of their American experience, their favorite stop was Perry's.

World peace.

I sat back down and finished exactly half my sandwich. Perry wrapped the rest, including the French fries, which I devoured the next day when I got home. But first, I sent him a check.

Trust.

I trust my nose and followed it recently to the Missouri State Championship barbecue fest in downtown Columbia. The contest itself is an olfactory tease, since the Kansas City Barbecue Society rules forbid onlookers from sampling contestants' fare. No problem. I took a side street to find the vendors lined on two sides with barbecue smokers the size of steam engines.

As I picked off a free sample from Lutz's BBQ, a Jefferson City favorite, I reflected on the most important ingredient in the perfect barbecue joint. Flavor. Sure, the meat and fixin's must pass the taste test, but if you don't smell smoke and sense the sweat, grime, and the pyrotechnic skills of the chef, you're probably standing too close to a microwave oven.



Perry Foster

**PERRY FOSTER'S BAR-B-QUE**  
WARRENSBURG  
SPECIALTY: COMBO SANDWICH  
660-429-6077



**LUTZ'S BBQ**  
JEFFERSON CITY  
SPECIALTY: HOMEMADE CHIPS  
573-353-4490

RACHEL NELSON; COURTESY OF LUTZ'S BBQ

Barbecue is a way of life. It's the foundation of our culture and will single-handedly see us through tough economic times. Somewhere, there should be a mutual fund specializing in barbecue-related industries: sauces, grills, utensils, clothing, and tailgating. Barbecue is the perfect marriage of sloppy and civil. It distinguishes humans from sharks.

If Atlantic City held a beauty pageant for words, barbecue would not win. The word can be spelled more ways than any other word in the English language. It's imprecise. It's messy and impolitic—the product of smoke-filled back rooms. Yet more ballads have been crooned to barbecue than to all the Miss Americas combined.

I still remember my first bar-b-q. Miles outside of Jeff City, on a curvy, scary road that led to the Lake of the Ozarks, the sweet smoke smell of burnt hickory permeated the rock walls of Alta Vista Barbecue. It was nothing fancy. And to this day, I dismiss any barbecue restaurant that looks too tidy. For example, folks flock to the rugged elegance of the world-famous Arthur Bryant's Barbeque in Kansas City. Perry Foster suggests a couple other joints near Swope Parkway: Big T BarBq, and LC's, right across from one another.

Rustic spots dot the landscape. Bates City Barbecue can raise a sweat on your brow. Biffle's Smoke House Barbeque in Concordia will smoke your clothes on contact. When the wind is blowing right, I can smell the smoker from Sutton's—now called J.R. Barton's Southern Kitchen & BBQ—just down the street from my house.

As the blue heron flies, it's more than four thousand miles from my house to Bodean's in London. Finding good barbecue in Britain is nearly as frustrating as finding a British Bobby in Braymer. But London has at least one world-class barbecue restaurant, and its roots are Missouri. (The concept has been so successful that Bodean's now boasts five London locations.) Bodean's is a whole lot of Kansas City packed into a Soho storefront. The owners even broadcast Chiefs football.

Not long ago, Bodean's hosted a dozen literary giants. Well, they were travel writers. I offered them food for thought. "A dozen years earlier, a London newspaper surveyed its readers, asking one question: Who is your favorite American? The top four vote getters were Mark Twain, Jesse James, Harry Truman, and Mickey Mouse. All Missourians." OK, I lied to them. Give 'em Hell Harry wasn't in the top four, but giving these writers a taste of Harry's hometown barbecue convinced them that Missouri should be on their travel itineraries.

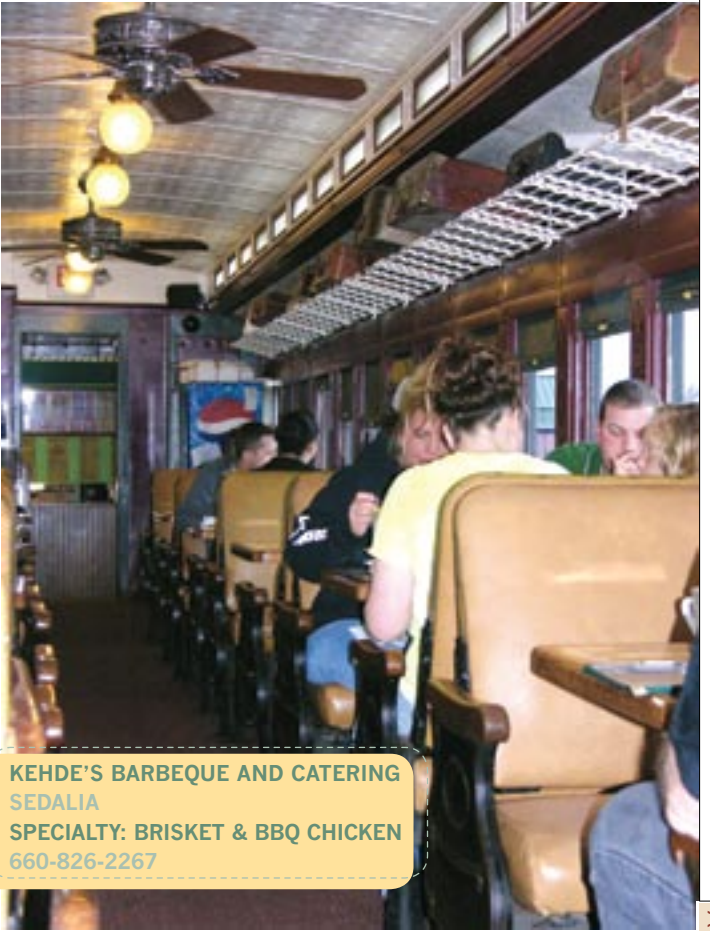
Where would I send them? That's a tough order. Counting back yards, there are more than two million barbecue spots in Missouri. Who has the best? Everybody. Just ask them and savor their responses, one at a time. Each is different. Each has a story to tell. Andy's Hickory Pit Barbeque in Eldon started as a street vendor. Kehde's Barbeque and Catering in Sedalia seats customers in a restored Katy railroad car. Chuck Wagon just outside Warsaw claims they have the "best ribs you ever had." Johnny's Smoke Stack in Rolla has burned down at least twice.

Yes, barbecue is dangerous business and a dirty endeavor. Few souls eat barbecue after church, in their Sunday finest. Still, it can be a religious experience.



**ARTHUR BRYANT'S BARBEQUE**  
**KANSAS CITY**  
**SPECIALTY: BEEF SANDWICH**  
**913-788-7500**

**BIFFLE'S SMOKE HOUSE BARBEQUE**  
**CONCORDIA**  
**SPECIALTY: SPARE RIBS**  
**660-463-7232**

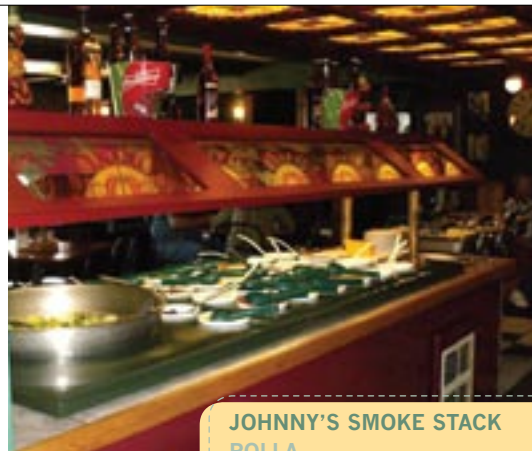


**KEHDE'S BARBEQUE AND CATERING**  
**SEDALIA**  
**SPECIALTY: BRISKET & BBQ CHICKEN**  
**660-826-2267**

COURTESY OF BIFFLE'S SMOKE HOUSE BARBEQUE; NOTLEY HAWKINS; TINA WHEELER



**THE HICKORY LOG**  
DEXTER  
SPECIALTY: RIBS  
573-624-4950



**JOHNNY'S SMOKE STACK**  
ROLLA  
SPECIALTY: RIBS & BRISKET  
573-364-4838

On a back road in the Bootheel, I had a barbecue epiphany. Just outside Puxico, at the Mingo National Wildlife Refuge welcome center, a crowd had assembled to discuss agritourism. When it was my turn to speak, I tried to flatter the locals. “When folks talk about barbecue, they mention Kansas City,” I offered. “But I know where to find the best barbecue in Missouri. It’s right here in Stoddard County, down the road in Dexter.” As soon as I mentioned two of my longtime favorite Southeast Missouri barbecue stops—The Hickory Log and Dexter Barbecue—folks started squirming and shaking their heads, flailing their arms, and shouting “Strawberry’s!” I was puzzled, not knowing what strawberries had to do with barbecue. The crowd kept chanting, “Strawberry’s ... Strawberry’s.”

I bit. “Strawberries?”

“In Holcomb ... in Holcomb,” they chanted. Thus, I discovered a new favorite barbecue joint in the tiny Dunklin County town of Holcomb. Dunklin is Missouri’s tallest county, standing almost forty-four miles from its sole to its crown. It’s shaped like the left side of an hourglass and stuffed mostly with cotton. Near the tiny waistline of this corseted county sits Holcomb. And Strawberry’s.

Indeed, the slabs at Strawberry’s are so tender, the meat falls off the bone from the vibrations of your voice. The sauce stands up to any Kansas City masterpiece, and if you want dry ribs Memphis style, Strawberry’s rivals the legendary Rendezvous, a block from Beale Street.

Not long after my first visit to Strawberry’s, *Gourmet Magazine* contacted the Missouri Division of Tourism. They wanted Missouri to shove a favorite local dish under the noses of hundreds of food writers at *Gourmet’s* international food show in Los Angeles. The magazine offered us a deal our media buyer said we couldn’t refuse. I agreed, seeing the value in our promotion, but only if we sent barbecue—not just any barbecue, but true representatives of Missouri, prepared with no shortcuts. Strawberry’s topped my list. Our crew recruited Gates Bar-B-Q, Fiorella’s Jack’s Stack Barbeque, Arthur Bryant’s Barbeque, and half a dozen other smokin’ savants. We packed a hundred slabs into dry ice for the trip west. When the smoke cleared at L.A.’s Staples Center, Missouri ribs stole the show. Many attendees had never tasted barbecue before, and word traveled like a wild mesquite fire through the crowd. Lines of barbecue seekers snaked out the arena and around the block.



**DEXTER BARBECUE**  
DEXTER  
SPECIALTY: RIBS & BRISKET  
573-624-8810



**GATES BAR-B-Q**  
KANSAS CITY  
SPECIALTY: RIBS & BBQ BEANS  
816-923-0900



**FIGORELLA'S JACK STACK BARBEQUE**  
KANSAS CITY  
SPECIALTY: CROWN PRIME BEEF RIBS  
816-942-9141

COURTESY OF THE HICKORY LOG; COURTESY OF JOHNNY'S SMOKE STACK; COURTESY OF DEXTER BARBECUE; COURTESY OF GATES BARBQ; COURTESY OF FIGORELLA'S JACK'S STACK BARBEQUE

**STRAWBERRY'S  
HOLCOMB  
SPECIALTY: PORK STEAKS  
573-792-9689**



The eleven-dollar, center-cut pork steak dinner is the house specialty at Strawberry's, owned by Jerry "Straw" Holsten and his wife, Sheila, in Holcomb.

In an informal survey, only a half slab of them had ever heard of a pork steak. Funny thing, pork steaks. Missourians take for granted that the world enjoys them. But outside of a circle of states bordering Missouri, nobody knows what they are. Some people might respond if you said "sliced pork butt." But why call them that? They're pork steaks.

Like pork steaks, barbecue is a regional specialty. Everybody south of the Mason-Dixon line believes they have the best barbecue. Carolina. Georgia. Tennessee. Texans, bless 'em, are no different, just more obnoxious about it. They think they originated barbecue.

LET 'EM THINK  
WHAT THEY WANT.  
I KNOW WHAT GOURMETS KNOW:  
*eat MO barbecue.*

## MORE RECOMENDATIONS

**ANDY'S  
HICKORY PIT BARBEQUE  
ELDON  
SPECIALTY: RIBS &  
SMOKED PRIME RIB  
573-392-4099**

**CHUCK WAGON  
WARSAW  
SPECIALTY: RIBS &  
BURNT ENDS  
660-438-2503**

**BATES CITY BARBECUE  
BATES CITY  
SPECIALTY: FRENCH FRIES  
816-625-4961**

**J.R. BARTON'S SOUTHERN  
KITCHEN AND BBQ  
COLUMBIA  
SPECIALTY: BBQ RIBS  
573-874-1227**

**BIG T'S BARBQ  
KANSAS CITY  
SPECIALTY: RIBS  
816-923-2278  
816-767-0905**

**LC'S  
KANSAS CITY  
SPECIALTY: BEEF SANDWICH  
& BURNT ENDS  
816-923-4484**