

Keep the home flag flying: balconied house in Charleston, South Carolina. Opposite, spicy pork ribs with Bourbon barbecue sauce

# Barbiegirl

Want a true taste of America? In the South, barbecue is more about hearts and minds than it is about meat, finds **Alicia Miller**



“G

irl, I hope you know what a serious job this is,’ draws the old man in faded camouflage overalls. I nod, solemnly. He digs the square heel of his polished sable cowboy boots into the floor, and tilts back in his chair, arms folded across his broad chest. With the weight of this movement half a dozen metallic pins knock against his breast – medals, awarded for his years of service – and a long black ribbon pinned to his denim shirt unfurls. I catch a glimpse of its bold silver lettering: ‘JUDGE’. I draw my breath.

Slow and rhythmic, with that unmistakable Southern slur, a voice crackles through the loudspeaker. More than a hundred of the old man’s colleagues – and that includes me – snap to attention. ‘A reminder to judges. Keep your eyes open for illegal garnishes. There should be no red-tipped lettuce, no kale.’ There’s a weighty pause. ‘And finger-lickin’ is strictly *pro-hib-it-ed*.’ He says ‘prohibited’ staccato, letting a momentary silence follow each syllable. With this, we rise in unison to take our judges’ oath.

Am I here to try a man for murder? Nope, I’m at a barbecue competition. This is the culmination of my 10-day meaty marathon of a road trip through ‘pork country’ – South Carolina, North Carolina and Tennessee. And, to be fair, it’s not just any barbecue competition: the Jack Daniel’s Invitational is the World Championship of cooked meat. Held in the autumnal-hued, pumpkin-studded, one-traffic-light town of Lynchburg, in rolling, bucolic Tennessee, it’s known to smoked-meat-lovers simply as ‘The Jack’. Every October, next to the atmospheric clapboard-and-corrugated-metal distillery where Tennessee’s liquid gold is pumped out day and night, this tiny town’s population swells from a few dozen to 25,000 in one day, as barbecue fans descend, and the 96 best teams in the world come to cook.

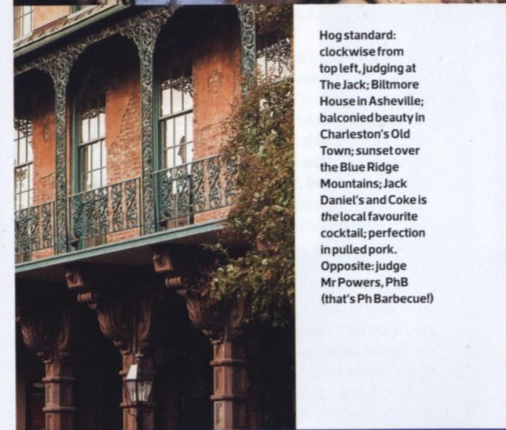
It’s 11am, but since before the sun came up the greenery has been engulfed in the dense, sweet aroma of slow-cooked meat. The judges, myself included, have been here for an hour or so, waiting, and as the least experienced, I’m anxious. Most have been doing this for decades, slowly working their way up from the local competition circuit to the prestigious Jack; meanwhile I was only ‘qualified’ on a course yesterday (for £66 anyone can take it) and, miraculously, allowed to judge today. The competitors? They’re more anxious still. The puffy eyes of weathered barbecue pit-masters are worn like badges of honour,

attesting to long, sleepless nights spent coddling pork shoulders as if they were newborns. Only a few mouthfuls are needed for the judges, but each one must be perfect – one overcooked rib or under-sauced chicken thigh and the \$10,000 (£6,670) 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 hiring 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 veil-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 ruddy-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-smokehouse Swig and Swine. ‘The chef isn’t from the South, so he *mixes* 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 Carolinian pulled pork alongside

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Hog standard: clockwise from top left, judging at The Jack; Biltmore House in Asheville; balconied beauty in Charleston’s Old Town; sunset over the Blue Ridge Mountains; Jack Daniel’s and Coke is the local favourite cocktail; perfection in pulled pork. Opposite: Judge Mr Powers, PhB (that’s Ph Barbecue!)



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 unceremoniously, I fall 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 signatories 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-bricked 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 timelessness, 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 onto 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. ➤

**SIDE DISH**

For the most 'authentic' offering, skip the pulled-pork sandwiches and instead order by the bowlful or 'plate'. This is plain pulled meat, often garnished with sliced white bread and pickles. You'll usually have to order other sides separately.

Quality street: confectionery-coloured houses in Downtown Charleston

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 creaky, 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 pigs 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 bowlfuls of chopped pork from her tray, easing it in alongside the collard greens and hush-puppies that have already arrived on our table. 'So that's your inspiration?' I ask, scooping 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 almost spreadable. 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 flavours and memories are resurrected every time they get together. 'That,' he says, 'is why barbecue matters. Because blood is thicker than water.' He leaves me with a banana-cream pie – a proper slice of retro nostalgia that, 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 windscreen changes once more. The I-40 is becoming increasingly winding, cutting through a wooded landscaped flecked with autumnal garnets, russets and golds. Broad panoramas are whittled down as forest closes in, a reminder that I'm approaching the Blue Ridge Parkway, one of America's greatest seasonal 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 gabled Victorian homes; the quaint downtown of buzzy 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 staid, old-school smoking scene I was getting to know.

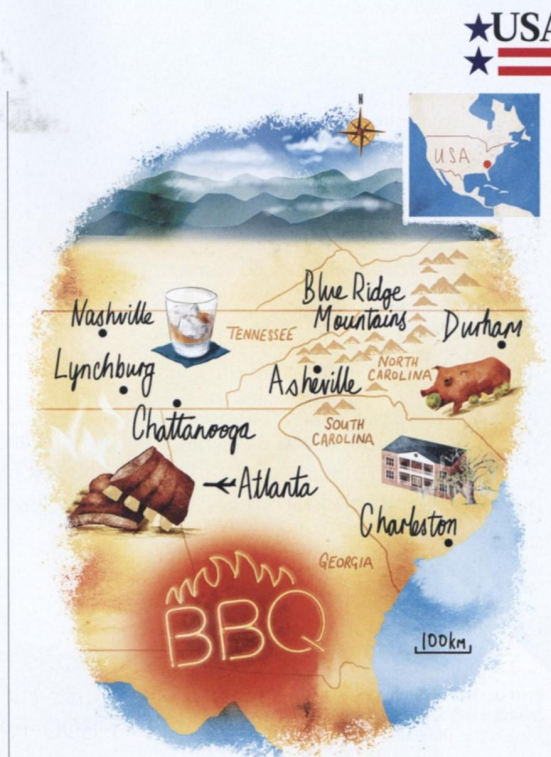
'Barbecue is an art – it might seem simple, but it's anything but,' Elliot Moss tells me through thick-rimmed glasses, as he leads me over to his smoker. An award-winning fine-dining chef, who traded it all in to open a barbecue restaurant, he took five years to hone his craft. In the open-plan kitchen, 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 pillowy pulled belly, her rich shoulder. She's sighingly tender, with a zippy cider 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 swine to something spiritual. For the first time, I can see what all those barbecue obsessives are banging on about – and I finally feel ready to become a judge.

Three days later, via an overnight in Chattanooga, I'm lolling in the judging tent in Lynchburg. I can't move. Chicken, pork, ribs, brisket – I've eaten every exquisitely crafted mouthful, a kilo in total. And now, in the dusky aftermath, the teams are pouring in around me, faces wrought 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 thigh number three was over-seasoned. That made the old man with the sparkly eyes snap up his head and say, 'Giiirl, you know your barbecue!' The winning team can keep their \$10,000 – my own Grand Championship moment was utterly priceless. ■

IT'S THE STUFF OF ROAD-TRIP DREAMS. BILLBOARD SIGNS PLEDGE 'JESUS IS HERE TO SAVE YOUR SOUL (JUST DIAL 1-800-FAITH. CHARGES MAY APPLY)'

**ROAD TIP**  
Autumn is peak time to drive the spectacular Blue Ridge Parkway – and the whole 755km takes several days to complete. But you can get the best of 'taster in a few hours: leave Asheville early in the morning and focus on the southern stretch



## Get Me There

map: Scott Jessop

### Go independent

**Delta** (delta.com) flies from Heathrow to Atlanta from £638 return, with onward connecting flights to Charleston, Nashville or Raleigh-Durham. Also try **BA** (ba.com), which has returns from £600.

### Where to stay

**King Charles Inn** (001843 723 7451, kingcharlesinn.com; doubles from £78, room only) is in Charleston's historic district. In Asheville, the **Bunn House** (001828 333 8700, bunnhouse.com; doubles from £150, B&B) has lovely suites. In Chattanooga, try **Bluff View Inn** (001800 725 8338, bluffviewardistrict.com; doubles from £69, B&B). An hour from Lynchburg, **Sheraton Nashville** has a country-music theme (001615 259 2000, sheratonnashvilledowntown.com; doubles from £152, room only).

### Where to eat

**Swig and Swine** in Charleston has top Texan barbecue (swigandswinebbq.com; mains about £9). In Durham,

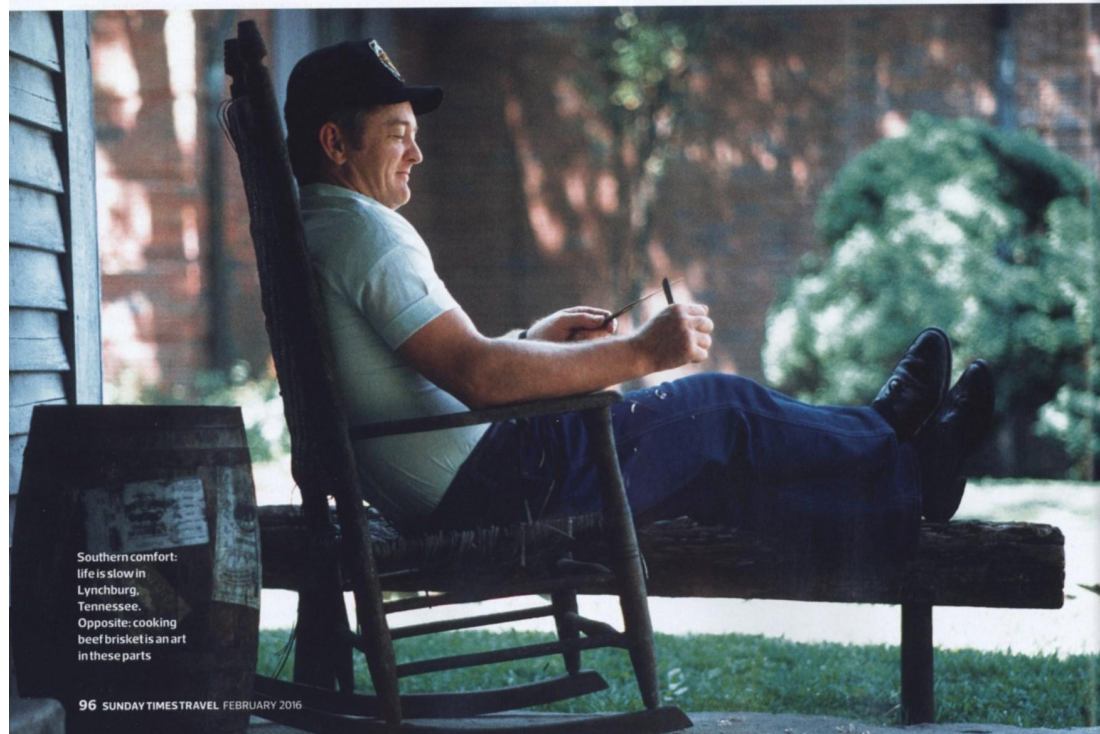
try **Q Shack** for smoked turkey (theqshackoriginal.com; mains about £7), or **Bullock's BBQ** for family cooking (bullocksbbq.com; mains about £7). In Asheville, **Buxton Hall Barbecue** does unreal pork (buxtonhall.com; mains about £9), and **Luella's** has BBQ tempeh, made from soy beans (luellasbbq.com; mains about £7). In Chattanooga, get Memphis-style ribs at **Clyde's On Main** (clydesonmain.com; mains about £9); outside Atlanta, try **Johnny Mitchell's** (johnnymitchellssmokehouse.com; mains about £8).

### Go packaged

**America As You Like It** (020 8742 8299, americaasyoulikeit.com) has an 11-night Southern BBQ Trail from £1,355pp, including flights from London to Charleston (returning from Nashville), car hire and accommodation.

### Further information

The **Jack Daniel's Invitational** (jackdaniels.com/bbq) takes place in October (dates TBA), and is free. For more, see [visittheusa.com](http://visittheusa.com).



Southern comfort: life is slow in Lynchburg, Tennessee. Opposite: cooking beef brisket is an art in these parts

