



Pork Paradise

A barbecue crawl through Tennessee

BY ANDREA LYNN

Memphis, Tennessee, is home to more than 100 barbecue restaurants. But a secret (shh!) is that good barbecue and Southern fare isn't just found within the Memphis city limits but all across Tennessee. This can be quite a dilemma for a pig-loving visitor like myself, who wants to hit the high points. I say: If the 'cue isn't juicy, succulent and smoky, why waste stomach space on it? So if you find yourself in the Volunteer State on the trail of great barbecue, here's your guide to uncovering the best they have to offer.

Interstate Bar-B-Que Memphis, Tennessee

The list of accolades for this 32-year-old barbecue restaurant goes on and on. It was ranked number two of the top 10 barbecue places in the U.S.A. by *People* magazine. *USA Today* named Interstate Bar-B-Que the best place in America for a pulled-pork barbecue sandwich. *Vogue* named it the best of the bunch in Memphis.

At the helm of Interstate is owner Jim Neely who, on the matter of ribs and pulled pork, tells dubious visitors used to Texas barbecue to "Try it my way. I've converted a lot of people."

Neely's wet ribs are just the way I like 'em—with a good amount of fat for succulence, and a fall-off-the-bone texture. Another winner is the pulled-pork sandwich topped with coleslaw made each day by Neely's wife. Now, I'm an equal opportunist when it comes to regional types of ribs and pulled-pork or beef sandwiches, but I was hesitant to try the barbecue spaghetti—a pile of spaghetti noodles, dark red barbecue sauce and chopped brisket. "Some people like it; some people don't," Neely says, matter-of-factly. Bravely, I sampled a little and can tell you that this barbecue/Italian fusion is good and very different from anything I've tasted before.



Interstate Bar-B-Que owner Jim Neely (top); the Neely Bunch family wall; sausage, ribs and pulled pork from the restaurant (above and below)



Two-year-old Lailah Robinson, granddaughter of Cozy Corner Bar-B-Que owner Val Robinson, helps out in the restaurant (below, left); Cozy Corner's in-house smoker (below, right); a plate of ribs, smoked chicken, coleslaw, baked beans and barbecue spaghetti at Cozy Corner (bottom).



Neely bought Interstate Drive-In and Grocery in the '70s. "It was a labor of love," he says. "We thought it was going to be here for six weeks and then be gone." In an effort to distinguish the store from other grocers, he devoted a back room to making and serving barbecue. It soon proved so popular that Neely turned the entire building into a restaurant dedicated to the craft. Now, the Neely name is synonymous with Memphis barbecue. Jim Neely's nephew, Pat, and his wife, Gina, are all over the television and media scene with a Food Network show and cookbooks. But Jim Neely wants to make sure that credit goes where credit is due: "I am the Neely that put Neely barbecue in Tennessee."

Cozy Corner Bar-B-Que Memphis, Tennessee

Owner Val Robinson runs this joint with the help of her daughter, Desiree, and her 2-year-old granddaughter, Lailah, who greets the customers with an exuberant smile. The 25-year-old restaurant, located down the street from Elvis's former high school, prides itself on its entire menu being made in-house. "Everything we serve, we bought raw and take off cooked," Val says. Patrons can witness the start of the barbecue process at the smoker at the front of the restaurant.

The ribs at Cozy Corner have a good jolt of hickory and black pepper that bursts in the back of the mouth. They get even better with spicy barbecue sauce added to the mix. The fire is almost too much, threatening to overwhelm the meat, but that's what the bread is for—the necessary third element to sop up the sauce and cool the flames. A side of chopped coleslaw light on the mayo is another welcomed cooler. When asked to share a few ingredients in the sauce, Val just smiles coyly and says, "salt and pepper." Well, I had to ask. Do not miss the restaurant's fried bologna—the thickest bologna I've ever laid my eyes on. Crispy on the outside, warm and mouthwatering inside, who knew fried bologna could be like this?

The Robinson family's quest with Cozy Corner is to be consistent always. "Everyone we served as a teenager, when they come back, we want to have things taste the same way," says Val.

A&R Bar-Be-Que Memphis, Tennessee

When Andrew Pollard was laid off from Morrell Meat in 1983, instinct took over. "I lost my job and had to feed the kids. It was survival," he said. His dad had been a master of the grill, and there were some family recipes floating around for inspiration. So Pollard started a restaurant on a shoestring, beginning as a one-room joint with carryout orders only. A homemade pit was "a gift from heaven" at the reasonable price of \$175. Rent was \$150 and another \$150 was borrowed for cooking supplies. Pollard's brother cooked for the restaurant, and Andrew and Rose's school-age kids helped out with the lunch service. Now, A&R Bar-Be-Que has blossomed to four locations, including one opened by their daughter seven years ago.

Every day, meat for the next day's service is cooked in an open pit over a smoldering coal-hardwood blend for heat and hickory for flavor. The pork shoulder goes on the bottom rack and the beef on top, fat-side down, to smoke for 14 to 15 hours. The Pollards stick with a system that works. "We don't change. I tried that once," Andrew said. Rose interjected, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." They have recently added turkey legs to the menu, a hot trend for restaurant-goers who are trying a walk on the healthy side of barbecue.

"I don't know how our menu got so big," Rose admits. "The post office across the street wanted variety so they would order every day." Variety is what they got, and everyone reaps the benefits. A & R's barbecue nachos are a dream—chopped meat with barbecue sauce, melted cheese, and jalapeños. You may ask what a barbecue joint is doing serving tamales. But these tamales—fluffy corn masa filled with spicy beef or turkey—are a delicious must-have and a confident leap out of the barbecue comfort zone. Don't leave here without experiencing the breaded and deep-fried dill pickle wedges with ranch dressing. Just the memory of them is making me salivate.

It's no surprise that the sauce is a secret recipe. And the Pollards love their sauce so much that they still make batches of it at home for family meals.



A & R's barbecue nachos (above, left); A & R Bar-Be-Que owners Andrew and Rose Pollard (above); the deep-fried dill pickle wedges (below, left); a full plate of ribs, pulled pork and sausage is oh so good.



Interstate Bar-B-Que

2265 S. Third Street
Memphis, TN
901-775-2304
interstatebarbeque.com

Cozy Corner Bar-B-Que

745 N. Parkway
Memphis, TN
901-527-9158
cozycornerbbq.com

A & R Bar-Be-Que

24 North Third Street
Memphis, TN
901-524-5242
aandrbbq.com

Martin's Bar-B-Que Joint

7238 Nolensville Road
Nashville, TN
615-776-1856
martinsbbqjoint.com



More Must-Try Spots

Pancake Pantry, Nashville:

The Santa Fe cornmeal pancakes with chunks of bacon, cheddar cheese and roasted chiles are the perfect way to start off a day of good eating. These pancakes can be smothered with maple syrup or salsa and sour cream. I chose the latter. Other popular breakfast choices are the sweet potato pancakes or the pancakes topped with fruit compote and whipped cream. thepancakepantry.com

Las Paletas, Nashville: There's no sign at this popsicle haven, which makes finding it tricky, but it's worth the sugary reward. The popsicles here are known for their powerful burst of unusual flavors like wasabi, pineapple chile, cucumber chile, Mexican caramel, eggnog and hibiscus. wheresthesign.com

Arnold's Country Kitchen, Nashville: This Southern "meat and three" place offers up all the fixings for a break from barbecue. The menu rotates; the day I visited they were serving up perfectly crisp fried green tomatoes, juicy roast beef, mashed potatoes drowned in gravy and cornmeal-crusted fried catfish. Be sure to save room for their desserts, like banana pudding. 615-256-4455.

Belle Meade Plantation, Nashville: Tour the old-school smoke-house at this antebellum plantation to see meat dangling from the rafters, just the way they did it back then. Although it's just for show, the sight had me wishing for samples. After touring the plantation, check out the Restaurant Belle and order the burger of all burgers—ground sirloin stuffed with braised beef and topped with a red onion jam. bellemeadepplantation.com

Brooks Shaw's Old Country Store, Jackson: The store alone is like a step back into time with an ice-cream parlor, numerous knickknacks and tee t-shirts like "Got Lard?" for sale. Local musicians show off their talents on some nights but the real star of the show is the buffet, where the Southern-style vegetables shine. caseyjones.com



Start the day with breakfast at Nashville's Pancake Pantry; Las Paletas owners show off their creatively-flavored popsicles; and Restaurant Belle Chef Brian Hainley and his braised beef-stuffed burger.



Bo Collier, left, and Pat Martin of Martin's Bar-B-Que



Martin's Bar-B-Que Joint Nashville, Tennessee

I met Pat Martin, owner of Martin's Bar-B-Que, last year in New York City when he served as inaugural pit master for the Big Apple BBQ Festival. He let me know that he had an extra-spicy barbecue sauce at his restaurant that practically required a waiver to try. "Did you bring it with you?" I asked excitedly. He had not, and thoughts of that sauce haunted my spicy dreams. Of course I had to look him up on my trip to Tennessee so I could finally try it.

Martin's Bar-B-Que is about more than spicy barbecue sauce. "Barbecue is a process," he says. "Where France has cheese, the South has barbecue." One of the keys, Martin says, is in picking the right cuts of meat to smoke. And it doesn't hurt that the meat is cooked over hickory slow and steady—the brisket takes 18 hours and the whole pork shoulder takes 22 hours.

Martin's genius lies in his variations on the standards, like brisket tacos (brisket, Martin's barbecue sauce and cilantro rolled in a tortilla) and redneck tacos (griddle cakes stuffed with pulled pork and slaw). It would be hard to pick a favorite dish here because everything is beyond tasty, but if I were forced I'd have to go with Martin's barbecued chicken. This is no typical barbecued chicken, which usually arrives at the table whole, roasted and glazed in barbecue sauce. Martin's invention is shredded, similar to pulled pork, and infused with a smoky flavor that can be doused with that dreamy sauce or not according to taste.

And did I finally get the sauce? Yes, and it's a hottie, that's for sure, burning my mouth for a long time. The sauce got me to the restaurant but it's the outstanding barbecue and Martin's Southern twists that will keep me coming back for more whenever I'm in the area. **CP**