FOREWORD

Plotting the Barbecue Republic

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BARBECUE MAY BE our most contested food. Americans, especially those of us who inhabit that broad swath running from Texas through Virginia, obsess over it. We love the good stuff. We loathe the bad stuff. (Bad, by the way, can be defined by both cultural and culinary deficiencies.) And informed by prejudice, provenance, and palate, we argue about which is which.

In “The Rhetoric of Barbecue: A Southern Rite and Ritual,” originally published in *Studies in Popular Culture*, Stephen Smith, long of the University of Arkansas, makes a case that, to understand barbecue, you have to make sense of barbecue rhetoric.

Smith, a professor of communication, calls talk of food “comestible communication.” And, when talk turns to barbecue, Smith says, ample opportunities for disagreement arise, including ones over “(1) definition of the South; (2) definition of barbecue; (3) correct spelling of the word; (4) type of meat; (5) type of cut; (6) ingredients for sauce; (7) type of pit; (8) type of wood; (9) wet versus dry cooking; (10) the highest shaman; (11) the preparation ritual; and (12) the design of the temple.”

Let’s set aside any promise of consensus on what is and is not the South. By my reckoning, the people and places profiled in the book you hold in your hands are, very generally speaking, borderland southerners. One foot in the South. One foot in the West.

Through their chosen vocations, they proclaim an allegiance that is more specific. They are citizens of the Barbecue Republic. Or, more accurately, they pledge their troth to various barbecue republics, some of which transcend region, while others don’t cross the county line.

Barbecue is a provincial dish. Remember Tip O’Neill, who served our country as Speaker of the House of Representatives for what seemed like forever? O’Neill was fond of saying, “All politics is local.” And so it is with barbecue. All barbecue is local.

Sociologist John Shelton Reed went O’Neill one better. Reed observed that “barbecue is the closest thing we have in the U.S. to Europe’s wines or cheeses; drive a hundred miles and the barbecue changes.” And so it is with barbecue in Central Texas. Although oftentimes, the drive is far shorter.

I direct the Southern Foodways Alliance, an institute of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi. We document and celebrate the diverse food cultures of the American South. (Yes, Central Texas falls within our inclusive purview.)

We’re serious about what we do. Scholarship catalyzes our oral-history and film work. An acknowledgment of a collective debt of pleasure, owed to generations of cooks whose names are lost to the ages, undergirds our efforts. We follow a path blazed by public historians, paying homage to everyday heroes, men and women who have spent their lives in the pit or at the stove.

In Elizabeth Engelhardt and her crew of young scholars, we have found fellow travelers. Herein, they parse the arguments in which barbecue-obsessed Texans engage and identify the humanity within. They revel in the knowledge that a study of regional foodways offers entrée to examining issues of race, class, ethnicity, and gender. Yet they acknowledge that while much of import can be gleaned from a close reading of oral-history transcripts, barbecue is also about pleasure, about the smoky punch of brisket cooked over smoldering post oak, about the piquant burst of flavor that gushes from hot-gut sausage, about the sweet soulfulness of buried-for-a-day barbacoa.

This is a signal moment in American foodways. Scholars, and laymen too, are waking up to the import of regional food culture. They’re recognizing that barbecue is one of our great American folk foods, a vernacular cultural creation worthy of intellectual energy and acuity. ✕

Inman's Ranch House, Marble Falls, Texas