BBQ

You Are What You Eat

A rarefied response to the Top 50 list

BY FHEARD

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Photograph by Jody Horton

[Editor's Note: What's almost as much fun as the TMBBQ Top 50? Reading responses to the TMBBQ Top 50. And we don't just mean the tweets and comments (though by all means, keep firing). In what we hope will be the first in a series, here is an especially erudite reply–"rumination" just might be a better word–from Frederick Coye Heard at the University of Texas. It originally appeared on his blog.]

I'VE SPENT A LOT OF TIME over the last couple of days (almost certainly too much time) following the release of *Texas Monthly*'s quinquennial list of the top 50 BBQ restaurants in the world. The fact that all 50 of the world's best BBQ joints are in Texas is no surprise to me, especially since *TM* places the largest portion of judgment on dry-rubbed, smoked brisket, and that pretty much only happens in Texas (they also give a substantial weight to pork spare ribs, also dry-rubbed and smoked). BBQ in Texas, unlike the Southeast, rarely includes pulled-pork, and, unlike pretty much everywhere else that does BBQ, it has nothing to do with sauce (no Carolina arguments about which minor adjunct gets mixed with the vinegar). It's a mantra in Texas that BBQ is about meat and smoke, and sauce is, well, just gravy.

Such mantras are all over the comments section of *Texas Monthly*'s Top 50 List. Food and region are lighting rods for the rhetoric of authenticity, and Texas likes its authenticity with a thick smoke ring. In the comment section (and in many Texas backyards) Real Texans like real BBQ, and if you don't (for instance, if you like an institution's sauce, its sausage, etc.) then you're probably a Yankee. The interactions in the comment section follow a predictable ebb and flow, where a person's taste in brisket comes to stand for authentic regional identity rather than, well, his or her taste. Here's a selection from the comments page and from Twitter:

"As always, the VERY best don't even make this list. Most real Texans know of some small place that hardly anyone ever heard of that is better than any of these more well publicized places. I won't get into names, etc. But all real Texans know what I am talking about."

"...if you've just moved here from California and have yet to eat any form of barbecue other than a McRib, perhaps."

"Clearly you've just moved here from Kansas City or something and know nothing about the history of Texas barbecue. It's centered around dry-rubbed meats, which are designed to be eaten WITHOUT sauce."

"@WestTX_BBQ: "The majority of people that seem upset about the Salt Lick being left off @tmbbq Top 50 appear to be Yankees."

"I hope they did not give points for pork ribs or sausage. I love them, but they are side dishes. Real BBQ is beef. "

As the final comment implies, people are willing to give up things they love (and which are pervasive in the regional cuisine) in search of the "Real." As Lacan or, more likely, Zizek might say, smoked brisket becomes the *objet petit-a* in our (I am a Texan, so I might as well claim the first person here) desire for both authenticity and identity. We are what we eat (or we wish we could be).

This slippage between plate and person is nothing new. Food is a pervasive component of our lebenswelt, a powerful source of pleasure and a magnet for all kinds of romantic nostalgia. We can't expect the food we grew up eating, the food that offers comfort, that marks celebrations, that lets us know we are home, etc. to escape all non-gustatory evalutations. And, in fact, we shouldn't want it to: regional variation in cooking is like dialect and terroir rolled into one, and commitment to the culinary traditions of a place encourages vitality, diversity and innovation (briefly: this is the critical distinction between "traditional"–an ongoing conversation with the past–and "authentic"–the sterile clinging to ojbet petit-a).

One of the more interesting turns in this year's *TM* Top 50 conversation happens when the search for (the) REAL BBQ shifts from regional style and saucelessness to other markers of identity. Again, here is a smattering from the comments and from Twitter:

"NONE OF YOUR COMMUNISTS REPORTERS COULD MAKE IT UP TO THE RED RIVER AREA, HUH ???!!! THAT'S WHY I NO LONGER SUBSCRIBE TO YOUR COMMIECRAT 'magazine' …."

"So @TexasMonthly claims @FranklinBbq to be the best in the world? Is their staff completely made up of Austin hipsters and frat guys? Lame."

"@wedley41: @TexasMonthly @tmbbq ?Did you even try Bodacious BBQ in Longview? Did a bunch of Yuppy city folk do this survey?"

While REAL Texans know about BBQ, hipsters, yuppies, city folk, frat boys and, in all caps, communists and commiecrats (a portmanteau that I can only assume stands in for Democrats) couldn't possibly know about it and shouldn't be trusted. I have to admit a trollish love of the all-caps comment above. The way that "magazine" not only appears in scare quotes but also drops to lower-case text expresses a nuance of contempt that the

capitals and exclamation points threaten to drown out. The screaming lunatic recovers his wits just long enough to let them know he has carefully considered his virulent hatred.

What I find most interesting in these comments, though, is the way that hipsters, yuppies, frat boys and Democrats all merge to signify "Austin." While the mutual disdain of the state and its capital are a common punchline throughout Texas, Austin sits in the center of the region where dry-rubbed, smoked brisket was developed by German and Czech communities into Texas' signature BBQ style. The geography of discounting Austin from Texas BBQ drips with irony (if not with sauce).

I was reminded of this particular geography after noting on Twitter that only 3 of the 50 BBQ joints chosen by *TM* were in West Texas (a sometimes squishy border, but the division between the eastern half of the state where it rarely rains and the western half where it pretty much never rains follows a curved line from Wichita Falls down to Del Rio). I was willing to chalk it up to the difference in population density. With the exception of El Paso, West Texas is sparsely populated, and the DFW, Austin, San Antonio and Houston metropolitan areas each have well over a million residents. But population was not the rationale I received from *TM*. The BBQ arm of the magazine sent me the following explanation of sorts through its @TMBBQ Twitter handle: "@HeardFC Steak country. Also, possibly, not enough Germans." Having been born and raised in Amarillo, one of the half-dozen cities in West Texas, I found this distinction both surprising and arbitrary. While steak and anything else that was once a cow is generally welcome on West Texas tables, no one I know in that part of the world would think of it as "steak country" as opposed to "BBQ country." There are a few minor regional differences from the Central Texas standard (the ubiquity of chopped beef sandwiches, toast instead of plain white bread, etc.), but there is no shortage of recognizably Texan BBQ joints out in "steak country." I was raised to admire the depth and hue of a good smoke ring and to know the difference between a barbeque–which is low, slow smoking all day–and a cookout–where you toss those steaks on a searing hot grill. But, as an Austin commiecrat from Amarillo, I don't expect you to take my word for it.

I think the BBQ list co-opted so much of my attention this year because I am in the process of leaving Texas and its much-loved foodways. I recently took a job in Virginia, and the thought of my eminent transfer to the Southeast with its pulled pork sandwiches and sauce-centric arguments has me feeling a bit nostalgic in the future anterior tense. I had such a sandwich in Mechanicsville last weekend, and, while it was good, it wasn't anything I recognized as BBQ, which has otherwise signified home. It's a whole other vocabulary of taste and tradition, and, though I am looking forward to developing my fluency, I know it

will never be my native tongue. On a previous trip to Virginia, someone asked me what I thought about moving to the South. I told him I was born in Texas and that, apart from my college years near Chicago, I have lived my whole life in the South. His reply–"Is Texas really the South?"–struck me as, in many ways, equivalent to putting me out in "steak country." I thought about the statue of Robert E. Lee below my office window at the University of Texas, about the statue of Jefferson Davis across the lawn and the Confederate soldier memorial on the capitol grounds. I thought about the cornbread dressing and other Southern staples we have for holidays, the grits in my cupboard, the drawls and twangs of my family's accents. Rather than pointing out all of this or the fact that Texas is the lynchpin of the GOP's Southern strategy or any of the other hundred markers of a REALLY Southern state, I just said, "Yes. Among other things."

(Frederick Coye Heard has three loves, two of which are food and philosophy. He holds a Ph.D. in English from the University of Texas in Austin, and he spends most of his time writing, reading, cooking and eating, sometimes in that order. He tweets about education, literature, food and public life at @HeardFC.)

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