

Pit Mastery in a Trailer Behind the Bar

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Esses Magazine

October 10, 2025



A platter from Parish BBQ, taken by Cathlin McCullough for *Esses*

Holden Fulco worked at the best BBQ joints in Austin. Now, he has started his own.

By Jessica Luther with Photos by Cathlin McCullough



The ham at Parish BBQ melts in your mouth. In the Texas barbecue world, beef brisket holds top billing as the state's hallmark smoked food. But Holden Fulco, the owner of Parish, has figured out how to make his ham shine. This is one of the many homages at Parish to Fulco's Louisiana roots, which trace to Shreveport where he grew up, and to New Orleans and Lake Charles where a lot of his family still lives. It takes Fulco and his employees more than a week to prepare the ham. Seven days in a brine, then a smoke, then back on the pit,

glazed multiple times with a mustard glaze, and then "we take them to a higher internal temperature than we do the first time," Fulco says, "so they're nice and tender."

Fulco brings this level of attention to all the food — and even to the wood — at Parish. Most Texas barbecue is oak, but in Louisiana, they like hickory. "That's all my grandpa used when he would do hams for Christmas, pork chops, all that," he says, "and I just wanted to do something different." Fulco has verified that he's the only one using hickory in central Texas.

Once you get him talking, Fulco will go into minute detail about anything on the menu. The duck legs they serve, which he believes is their most unique dish, are a labor of love. "We pull the skin off, and then we fry the skins up separately, so they puff up and get really crunchy," he says. "We season them with orange pepper seasoning, smoke them for like three hours, we cover them in a pan with duck fat and confit on the pit." Once the birds have cooked, "we pick all the bones out, and then we season it again with more orange pepper, apple cider vinegar, fresh orange zest, and orange juice." To finish the dish, "when we serve it, it's just dripping with all those juices and put it on a tray and then we top it with the crunchy duck skins."

And he doesn't reserve this care just for the meat. Sides get it, too. The bestselling crawfish cornbread dressing is based on his grandma's recipe. The pimento mac and cheese has five types of cheese and is topped with Zapp's Voodoo chips. For Parish's potato salad, they boil the potatoes in crab boil seasoning, "so it's like potatoes you'd pull out of a crawfish boil."



Fulco did not learn any of this at culinary school. He learned by doing, first with a smoker on the front porch of his college apartment, later at his first job at Pinkerton's in Houston. He then came to Austin to work at the famed Franklin BBQ with James Beard Award-winning chef Aaron Franklin. "The thing I probably learned the most through working there," he says, "was how much I did not know."

In 2020, after a year at Franklin, Fulco moved to InterStellar BBQ where he started off cooking on what was then a very small team. "That's kind of what I loved about working there," Fulco says, "It was like five of us for a long time." The pandemic allowed them to "really focus on the food and hone what we were doing. I think the food got a lot better over that year and a half." John Bates, the pitmaster, was "more of a trained chef, worked in fine dining a lot, that kind of thing," Fulco says. "A lot of how he thinks about food really colored how I try to do things with our menu, like complimentary flavors and thinking about the sides a lot, about how they interact with the other food, and just how important bright flavors and acidity is with a cuisine that's as heavy as barbecue."

Fulco became the general manager of InterStellar in 2021 but "I still cooked quite a bit because that's what I'm passionate about." Then, in October 2021, *Texas Monthly* named InterStellar the second best barbecue in the state on their influential "Top 50 BBQ Joints" list, launching InterStellar into the top echelon of the barbecue world. In 2024, InterStellar received a Michelin star.

That same year, Fulco began doing popups while still working at InterStellar. "I always kind of knew in the back of my mind that I wanted to do my own thing." Fulco left InterStellar at the end of 2024 and opened the trailer for Parish in March 2025. In a city like Austin, which many refer to as "The Food Truck Capital of the World," Fulco believed that he could build his "own thing" from scratch and the barbecue lovers would find it.

Parish's trailer is located in the backyard of Batch, a spot that specializes in craft beer and kolaches. "We would love for people to come out and hang out with us," Fulco says. "Grab a beer, grab some barbecue. It's a great spot back here." The partnership has also led to arguably the most addictive item on Parish's menu. Batch cooks up rolls made with their sweet kolache dough and then Fulco and his team flash fry them in the trailer, which gives the soft bread a rich crispiness. "We make a Tabasco honey butter that we serve with them, and that stuff is literally like icing," he says. "It's a dessert." People buy them by the dozen.



Fulco says that Austin is a great city for barbecue because "it's got a lot of cool culture and history. And it's the one city that seems to have a limitless capacity for holding barbecue restaurants." He's loving his life in Batch's backyard, but he still hopes to one day have a brick-and-mortar restaurant of his own, too. "I am thankful to be in the trailer and have the business, but it is not where I want to be forever."

Having worked at two of the city's best barbecue joints, he also knows that to leave your mark on the Austin scene, you have to offer something new. "You just can't do something super traditional anymore and expect to make it. There's plenty of places cranking out just great brisket, ribs, and sausage, but to stand out now, you have to do something different." Fulco believes his Louisiana twist on Texas barbecue is his way in. "A lot of the Cajun food, there is already like a smoked element to a lot of it. There's a lot of live fire cooking, a lot of game meats, things like that. So I wanted to incorporate that into the traditional Texas barbecue."

But to be clear, he says, Parish is not a Louisiana barbecue joint that *happens* to be in Austin. "We're Texas barbecue with Louisiana roots."