

# PIT CREW

ALABAMA'S COMPLEX BARBECUE CULTURE IS UNRIVALED. HEAR WHAT SOME OF THE MEAT-MASTERS HAVE TO SAY ABOUT SOME OF THE BEST CUISINE IN THE HEART OF DIXIE.

BY DANIEL SCHUMACHER | PHOTOS BY JASON WALLIS



When I drive past a place that I haven't heard of —like The Brick Pit in Mobile—a little hole in the wall with smoke coming out of the chimney, I'll always stop. That's how you find the best places."

Sitting with pit master Mike Wilson among the vintage signs and southern rock of Saw's Barbecue, his months-old restaurant in Homewood, one more barbecue truth had echoed through my interviews. Whether pulled from a charcoal-filled can, found in a smoky backwoods shack, or served in a multi-restaurant empire, barbecue has been equal parts fascination and obsession for generations of Alabamians. The mayonnaise-based white sauce to which our state stakes claim perhaps pales in comparison to the rich diversity of Alabama's barbecue heritage. Like a slice

of Dreamland's Sunbeam, Alabama sops up Carolina's vinegar and mustard-based sauces, and sops the sweet and spicy tomato sauces of the south and west. Styles vary, and folks hold tight to their local and personal tastes, creating a culture that encourages everyone to become a vocal proponent and defender.

From time to time, local and personal preferences lead to disagreements on when to rub or how to sauce (or not), but a deep abiding respect and reverence for the animal remains ever constant. Troy Black, a seasoned pit master on the competition barbecue circuit, says Birmingham's city limits is a smorgasbord of barbecue, but people lay a fierce territorial claim to their favorite barbecue. "There are people in Tuscaloosa who will fight you about Dreamland BBQ. They'll let



you know that Dreamland makes the very best ribs in the whole wide world, and no one makes a better rib.”

In a sense, barbecue isn't cooked at all. It is shepherded. The best pit masters take a homely cut of pork, beef, or chicken and gently coax out tender, smoky barbecue—over glowing embers they partner with wood and guide the meat to its mouthwatering destiny. Time and patience perhaps hold the most currency, and while they practice different styles, Alabama barbecue legends Chris Lilly of Big Bob Gibson's and Full Moon Barbecue's David Malouf agree on those key elements. They may also agree that a sixth sense is involved, along with cook's trust in their abilities. “The best barbecue cooks and pit masters know what's happening under the lid of the grill. People who check the temperature all the time are doing more harm than good,” Lilly says.

**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** The classic Dreamland combo of ribs and white bread. The iconic Full Moon logo. The back side of Saw's BBQ in Homewood. A platter of pure joy from Full Moon. The long bar at Dreamland's Southside location.



## WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A GREAT BBQ JOINT

BY ART RICHEY

In January 2009, three friends and I embarked on a 3,000-mile barbecue adventure through the Southeast in an SUV we named Babe the Pig. “The Southern BBQ Boys” logged 19 restaurants over 17 days as part of an independent study for Birmingham-Southern College. Neither sickness nor fatigue slowed us down as we sampled some of the best ribs, shoulders, and pulled chicken in the South. We were caught off guard by the media attention throughout the trip but charted our progress at [www.southernbbqboys.com](http://www.southernbbqboys.com), complete with color photos and video. Here's what we learned:

**SMOKE.** Lots of smoke. You must be able to smell the meat and see smoke once you step outside of your car or truck. This is a great sign because you know so many people are eating the 'que that the smoker never stops.

When you walk in, there are no gimmicks or distractions on the wall, the table, or with the waiters. A serious barbecue joint is all about the meat and sides. Period.

**A DIVERSE CROWD.** One thing about barbecue, especially in the South, is that people from religious denominations, SEC allegiances, and political persuasions can put their differences aside for a great plate of pulled pork. Once you walk in, you must notice the diversity but also the conversation: is it touristy? Is there more talk about football or foreign policy? If it leans towards football, you know you have the right place.

See our Alabama picks on page 65.



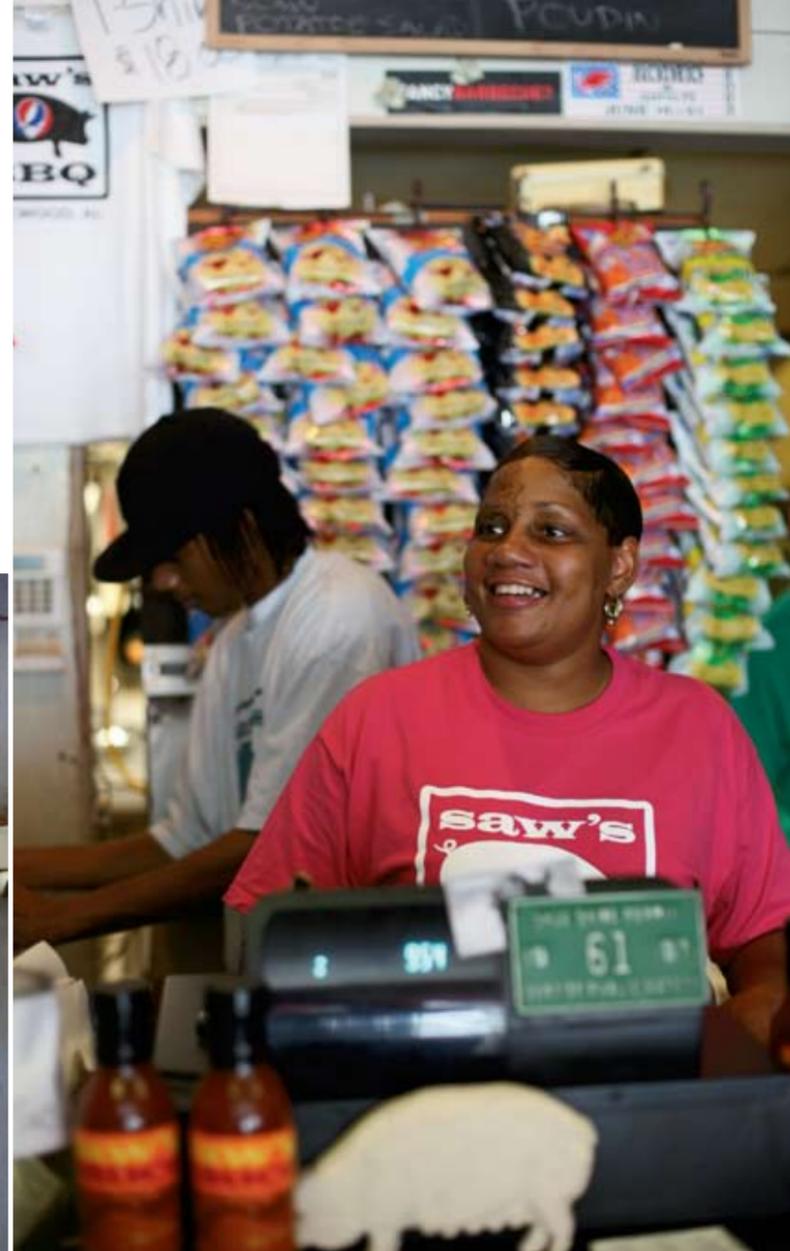
**CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW:** Chris Lilly is the great-grandson-in-law of the legendary Bob Gibson of Big Bob Gibson's in Decatur. Now the executive chef of the restaurant, Lilly is also a cookbook author and frequent Food Network guest. Saw's beer sign and friendly counter staff. A whole chicken in white sauce at Big Bob Gibson's.

Restaurants are faced with the difficulty of having to produce massive quantities of meat in relatively short amounts of time, which can lead to smoking in closed smokers instead of over a smoldering fire. This satisfies their customers' immediate demands but deprives diners of the "outside meat." According to Malouf, a true barbecue connoisseur loves outside meat for its smoky crunch. Joints with visible open pits like Bob Sykes' and Full Moon, which was recently recognized by Gayot.com as one of the Top 10 BBQ restaurants in the country, are sought-after for their crunchy-yet-tender inside/outside pork sandwiches.

"Barbecue transcends race, gender, economic status. People sit around and talk politics and football,

but they'll also sit around and have spirited arguments about where to find the best ribs. It not only brings people together but offers discussion that everyone can take part in," Chris Lilly says of barbecue's universal appeal. Driving by a favorite pit, you'll see clunkers and Cadillacs, and once inside among the sweet smoke and '50's music, you're just as likely to sit down next to a mayor, coach, mechanic, electrician, surgeon, or student.

"When that smoke wafts by it tears down any self-made boundaries that could possibly be imposed. Barbecue becomes a human bonding agent, and there's something really cool about that," says Todd Steadman, Kansas City-certified barbecue judge and co-author of *The Heart of Dixie Glovebox Guide to Bar-B-Que*. 🍷



## BARBECUE JOINTS

**THE SOUTHERN BBQ BOYS**  
**TOP PICKS**  
 Dreamland (Tuscaloosa)  
 Byron's (Auburn)  
 Demetri's (Homewood)  
 Big Bob Gibson's (Decatur)

**TRIED AND TRUE**  
 Big Bob Gibson's Bar-B-Que (Decatur)  
 Bob Sykes's BBQ (Bessemer)  
 Dobb's Famous Bar-B-Que (Dothan)  
 Miss Myra's Pit Bar B Q (Cahaba Heights)  
 Top Hat Barbecue (Blount Springs)

**BIRMINGHAM'S FINEST**  
 Full Moon Bar-B-Que  
 Golden Rule Barbecue  
 Jim 'n Nick's Barbecue

**CAMPUS FAVORITES**  
 Archibald's (Tuscaloosa)  
 Byron's (Auburn)  
 Chuck's Bar-B-Que (Opelika)  
 Dreamland (Tuscaloosa)

**NEW BOYS**  
 Saw's BBQ (Homewood)

**READERS CHIME IN WITH TOP BBQ PICKS IN THE STATE**

**ON TWITTER:**  
**alanbarton-**@ThicketMag  
 Miss Myra's pulled pork sandwich is the JAM!

**carynorton-**@ThicketMag  
 sliced sammich from Full Moon. plate from Jim N Nicks. There's another place in Madison County at a gas station that's great.

**abstractrandom-**@ThicketMag  
 Definitely Southern Bar-B-Q in Florence.

**BirminghamWorks-**@ThicketMag  
 Woody's BBQ on Hwy 11 in Trussville

**westsidenotes-**@ThicketMag  
 Thomas Rib Shack and Lewis Heavenly Q, both in Tuscaloosa.

**jasonlovoy-**@ThicketMag  
 Our favorite BBQ right now is @sawsbbq in homewood. Amazing.

**millermobley-**@ThicketMag  
 Moe's, they have several locations.

**bhamcollective-**@ThicketMag  
 Lannies in Selma.

**pinxy-**@ThicketMag  
 Lawler's BBQ in Huntsville.

**LoydMcIntosh-**@ThicketMag  
 Country's in Montgomery; Jim Deerman's in Adamsville; Bob Sykes' in Bessemer.

**ON FACEBOOK:**  
**Stephanie Holden Smith**  
 Dobbs, Dothan, & Full Moon, Birmingham

**Mary Beth Burner**  
 Saw's. Most definitely.

**Stephanie Duke Patton**  
 I'm a new convert to Saw's, too.

**Valerie Caterinicchia**  
 The Original Golden Rule in Irondale.

**Ginger Brook**  
 Best ribs in AL? Pig Stand in Hartselle. Best ribs in B'ham? Road Side Barbecue in Woodlawn.

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