

BARBECUE GALORE



Meyers Elgin's hot sausage.

IF YOU CAN'T STAND THE MEAT, KEEP OUT OF THE KITCHENS IN THE CARNIVORE CORRIDOR

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escape 39

IT is known as the Barbecue Belt – 160km of two-lane blacktop just out of Austin, Texas. This is carnivore country, where meat is king and salad is a dirty word. It is served up in an array of “Que Joints”, from a dusty corrugated shack where massive beef briskets are pulleyed up from a pit to a small minister’s hut dubbed Church of the Holy Smoke where chickens are roasted on a spit in an oil barrel.

The area around Austin boasts 20 Cuisine de Char temples ranked in *Texas Monthly* magazine’s Top 50 BBQ Joints. Three companions and I set out to sample seven of them in a dawn-to-dusk meat marathon.

We set off at sunrise, driving for 30 minutes through hill country past trailer parks, grey, crumbling wooden shacks and cars abandoned by the side of the road, before pulling up at Smitty’s Market in Lockhart. The rotund, bald pitmaster, John Fullilove, resplendent in white shirt and apron, is a hoot of a meat man. He explains that there are no plates (“Brown butcher paper will do”), no utensils, (“You were born with hands, weren’t you?”) and no waitresses (“You hungry? Come up to the counter!”).

We chose a mix of sliced beef brisket, still smoking with blackened edges, steaming sausages that oozed fat and shiny pork ribs that left us sated with smoke.

Just down the street, Kreuz Market looks like a barn on the outside and a high-school cafeteria on the inside. The competition between Smitty’s and Kreuz is fierce because of a family split, and here there were pork chops, prime rib, ham and fiery jalapeno cheese sausage links in addition to the brisket, ribs and regular sausage



Three generations of pitmasters at Southside Market in Elgin, Texas.

rings. They serve no sauce. “Now why you wanna go wet down a perfectly good piece of meat, bubba?” We took our pick of pieces by the pound and pigged out, staggering out at 11am with five more to go.

The next stop was Luling, 15 minutes away. Outside the City Market are rows of pick-up trucks and Harleys. Inside it’s clean and cool despite the iron ovens and smoking pits. On the table are bottles of spice-speckled, dark orange sauce. And there are utensils, though the plastic knife can barely cut the skin of a sausage. “A good set of teeth in your mouth works better,” we’re told. Another sheet of pink butcher paper is made into a boat for the slabs of mutton and we’re just starting to stain our shirts when it’s time to go.

An hour away is Elgin, where Meyers Elgin Sausages

bills itself as “Cue-Topia”, with the welcome sign, “We Love Vegetarians. What do you think Cows & Pigs are?” We pick the three-meat combo of beef sausage, pork garlic sausage and a Dinosaur beef rib.

Just 2km up Highway 290 is Southside Market & BBQ – a guts specialist (sausage maker) whose claim to fame is Elgin Hot Guts, which live up to their name by being both spicy and wrapped in real intestines. Thank God they serve beer.

Taylor is only 20 minutes down the road, but we’re slowed by our increased weight and expanding waists. We barrel into Louie Mueller Barbecue, famed for its brisket which spends up to 18 hours in 50-year-old brick and steel pits that burn logs of post oak. We had that, and for something different, boneless, spice-rubbed, smoked turkey breast and pork tenderloin. We were warned to cover our frontal surfaces when tackling the chipotle pepper sausage as the juices would be out to get our shirts. The juices won.

Reeling out of there, we decided to walk off the grease and hoof down to Rudy Mikeska’s Bar-B-Q, where the elderly dinner crowd was starting to queue for the US\$6.50 All-You-Can-Eat Fried Chicken, Fried Catfish and Chicken Fried Steak Buffet, which included vegetables and salad bar. All we could pack in was one order of lamb ribs between us, then it was out the door to Austin.

The ride back was a blur, playing the blues all the way with moans for lyrics. We parked the car, stumbled into our beds and awoke the next morning with the fragrance of smoke on our fingers.