



FIRED UP

Texas Hill Country barbecue spots compete to be known as the best in the state.

BY JAY CHESHES



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There are a few things you should know before heading into mid-Texas on the barbecue trail. For one, don't expect your meat to come with sauce unless the pitmaster's a maverick—in which case it might show up unbidden drenched in a sweet and spicy tomato concoction. And don't look for a plate—the barbecue in these parts is served on scrunched butcher paper. Ditto for forks—the big stack of sliced white bread is there for ripping and wrapping. Lastly, go hungry.

San Antonio is a good place to begin your journey onto the Southern Foodways Alliance's Southern BBQ Trail. Though not known as a barbecue town—Tex-Mex is the signature cuisine here—it's the gateway to Hill Country, home of the best slow-cooked smoked meat the Lone Star State has to offer. About an hour from San Antonio, Luling is your first stop for a barbecue breakfast; City Market opens bright and early (sausage is ready at 7am; brisket and ribs at 9:30). Joe Capello has run the pits at this legendary 'cue joint since 1969, serving three meats and two sides (pinto beans and potato salad), and that's pretty much it.

Don't be fooled by the clean-cut surroundings: The oak-smoked pork ribs, beef sausage and brisket are as old school as they come. Like so many Hill Country barbecue spots, this one evolved from a venerable meat market. The German and Czech immigrants who settled the area long ago brought their butchering skills—along with their knack for turning meat scraps into delectable sausage, which is as much a part of the barbecue tradition in these parts as anything else. At City Market, the plump peppery links, delicious caramelized ribs and rich, fatty brisket are all fished to order from big, weathered smokers and piled onto paper from inside a walk-in hotbox at the back of the dining room.

Like all of the state's best known 'cue spots, City Market has partisans who'll swear it's the best in Texas.



Serious barbecue, as the plaques and trophies that fill so many smoke-filled dining rooms attest, is intensely competitive here. In Lockhart, up the road 15 miles, the sign into town announces you're entering the "Barbecue Capital of Texas." Kreuz Market, founded in 1900, was once the only draw here—until an intense sibling feud broke the business in two.

In 1999, Nina and Rick Schmidt—whose father Edgar "Smitty" Schmidt bought the original place from the Kreuz family in 1948—disagreed about the future direction of the business. Nina, who owns the nearly century-old building, stained black from many decades of smoke, didn't want to extend the lease on the barbecue restaurant inside, which her brother ran. He responded by moving Kreuz into a new warehouse-style structure a half-mile away. Three weeks later, Nina opened Smitty's Market in the original space.

The new Kreuz breaks from tradition at every turn—serving jalapeno-cheese sausages and shipping across the country. The restaurant offers an encyclopedic selection of barbecued meats that includes prime rib and pit ham. Meanwhile, Smitty's remains a purist operation, with just classic meats on the menu (brisket, sausage and ribs) sold from a blackened room where wood pyres lay smoldering on the floor at your feet. In March 2010, the squabbling siblings took their barbecue battle to the national airwaves, agreeing to a showdown with a blind taste-test on the Travel Channel's *Food Wars*. Though Kreuz came out on top, the plump and juicy beef-and-pork sausage and moist, fatty brisket at Smitty's were, in fact, among the best that I tasted on my barbecue tour.

Smitty's ribs were outshone only by the caveman

VIEW TO A GRILL (clockwise from opposite left) One of Kreuz's massive pits; an assortment of Kreuz's offerings, some of which stray from tradition; Louie Mueller Barbecue; John Fullilove, pitmaster and manager at Smitty's

CITY MARKET
663 East Davis St,
Luling (61 miles
from San Antonio);
830-875-9019

KREUZ MARKET
619 N Colorado St,
Lockhart (62 miles
from San Antonio);
512-398-2361;
kreuzmarket.com

SMITTY'S MARKET
208 S Commerce St,
Lockhart (62 miles
from San Antonio);
512-398-9344;
smittysmarket.com

**LOUIE MUELLER
BARBECUE**
206 W Second St,
Taylor (115 miles
from San Antonio);
512-352-6206;
louiemueller
barbecue.com

SOUTHERN BBQ TRAIL
southernbbqtrail.com

beef ribs at Louie Mueller's namesake spot, an hour's drive farther northeast in Taylor. This monster operation, founded in 1949, occupies a cavernous space. Just one dinosaur rib—at least that's what they look like—is enough for a meal. The beef brisket, in a pastrami-thick layer of peppery rub, is the other house specialty. Both were developed by Louie's son Bobby (who took over in 1974). Louie's grandson Wayne currently runs the business, taking over when Bobby passed away in 2008 (two years after the restaurant was recognized as an American classic at the James Beard Awards).

While there are plenty more barbecue spots out on the trail—which goes up across Texas into remote cowboy country—aficionados often agree that Louie Mueller belongs at the top of the list. Take a week, hit the road hungry, taste and compare. But be ready to loosen your belt if you want to become an expert. ●



ALTERNATE ROUTE The rivalries between Texas barbecue joints are nothing next to the one in North Carolina, where two very different styles—Eastern and Lexington—vie for dominance. Try both on the **North Carolina Barbecue Society Historic Barbecue Trail**. ncbbsociety.com