

TEXAS HIGHWAYS—COUNTRY TAVERN—QUERY—MALLORY

Hickory-smoked pork ribs dripping with vinegary-sweet sauce. For Texas barbecue rib devotees, it doesn't get any better. That's Country Tavern's stock and trade, and that's why the Kilgore-area eatery remains a meat-eater's Mecca.

What began in 1939 as a honky-tonk that served barbecue has evolved into a legendary barbecue restaurant that mostly maintains its honky-tonk heritage.

After waitress Lois Mason took over Country Tavern in 1964, she made it famous for its ribs and brisket and her customer hugs at the front door. Lois died in a car wreck in 2003, and her grandson Toby Pilgrim took up where she left off. In fact, Toby took a few steps farther along the road to encasing the restaurant's "legendary" status. He replaced dingy walls with warm wood siding, removed sagging ceiling tiles and vaulted the ceiling and brightened the lighting that was purposefully kept low to disguise the dingy walls and sagging ceiling. He limited smoking to the bar and pool table area. He added a Texas-themed party room, remodeled the aging bathrooms and added a few items to the menu. Most importantly, he kept the same barbecue cooking style, spices and sauce for the Country Tavern's ribs and brisket.

Business has doubled in the last four years, and guests now bring their whole family...though occasionally long-time customers still push back tables, sprinkle salt on the floor and boot-scoot to a country-western tune blaring from the jukebox.

I'll highlight what's new and what's old at one of the state's top barbecue places. I'll also pursue a short sidebar on a lesser-known but equally-cherished nearby barbecue joint called Pat Gee's. The place has historically been publicity-shy, so I'll keep you posted.