

‘Cue it Up!
If it’s barbecue in Tyler, it’s Stanley’s

text by Randy Mallory

When out-of-town guests come calling, and their mouths water for barbecue, my choice, hands down, is Stanley’s Famous Pit Bar-B-Q. The half-century-old eatery has grown into one of the Rose City’s hottest go-to destinations for grub of any genre. The joint dishes up a tasteful blend of smoked meats, old-fashioned tradition, and live roots music...along with the slogan “Be Kind. Have Fun.”

Major kudos of the last few years vaulted Stanley’s into the holy-smoke pantheon of Texas ‘cue joints. In 2008 *Texas Monthly* named it one of the world’s 50 best BBQ joints. Stanley’s proceeded to win the people’s choice Best Pork Ribs awards in 2010 *and* 2011 at the *Texas Monthly* BBQ festival in Austin. It’s also been touted in recent barbecue books by smoked-meat aficionados Daniel Vaughn (*The Prophets of Smoked Meat: A Journey Through Texas Barbecue*) and David Gelin (*BBQ Joints: Stories and Secret Recipes from the Barbecue Belt*).

My Stanley’s love affair goes back to childhood and my first memories of barbecue. It began around 1960, about the time J.D. Stanley took over a 1940s barbecue shack and added a red-and-green neon sign proclaiming Stanley’s Famous Pit Bar-B-Q. (Tyler recently designated the sign a historic landmark, the first sign so honored.) I still recall pushing open Stanley’s screen door with my dad, Tom Mallory, who worked a short walk away as a barber. We’d order chopped beef sandwiches served on butcher paper and sit side by side in one-piece school desks, the only seating in the tiny joint. We’d pour on the spicy sauce and munch away in smoky bliss surrounded by knotty-pine walls and sawdust on the concrete floor to soak up wayward juicy drippings.

The sawdust and school desks are gone, but folks still queue up at the original yellow Formica counter, surrounded by knotty pine walls, to get smoky meats on butcher paper three meals a day. Yes, barbecue for breakfast. Giant burritos are top sellers—large flour tortillas stuffed with scrambled eggs,

cheddar cheese and a choice of meats. My favorite day-starter is J.D.'s breakfast bowl—a large bowl layered with scrambled eggs, pan-fried red potatoes, cheddar cheese and choice of meats.

And what a choice of meats it is! Chopped or sliced brisket rimmed with ample bark (the crunchy, peppery, fatty edge that gives brisket its mouthwatering flavor). Savory sausage, hot links and pulled pork, as well as smoky and spicy turkey breast. Plus the prize-winning baby back pork ribs rubbed twice with 11 spices and cooked slowly for hours—as are the other meats—in the low-heat smoke of pecan wood.

For lunch I tend to revisit childhood memories with a toasted bun piled an inch or more high with chopped brisket to which I splay dill pickles, sliced onions, and squirts of sweet-spicy sauce still made according to J.D.'s handwritten recipe. Sometimes I pick the long-standing signature sandwich, the Shrove, named for the Lenten day, Shrove or Fat Tuesday. This pile-up of brisket, ham, and cheese (indeed, barbecue and cheese go well together) has a descendant sandwich called the Brother-in-Law (named by a customer) which substitutes a sausage link for ham. I've yet to try Stanley's most outrageous new sandwich. The audaciously dubbed Mother Clucker puts smoked chicken thigh, fried egg, cheddar cheese, spicy mayo, candied bacon, and guacamole (on request) between slices of jalapeño cheese sourdough bun. *Texas Monthly* BBQ snob Daniel Vaughn calls it the best sandwich of the year.

For dinner I often go whole hog with a mixed meat plate of pork ribs, brisket, and sausage complimented with sides of fresh-made cole slaw, potato salad, and cowboy beans. The meats are so well seasoned that sauce is purely optional. Stanley's boasts a full bar, so I grab a cold Texas beer and enjoy my meal on the open-air, covered patio, hopefully on a night featuring live music. (Fridays offer traveling name acts playing music from Latin funk and blues to Texas roots and reggae.)

Stanley's remains the city's oldest mom and pop restaurant. These days the mom and pop are Jen and Nick Pencis, who have their own love affair with Stanley's. That's where they first met and where Nick proposed marriage. The thirty-something couple took over the eatery in 2006 determined

to blend a half-century tradition with first-class service, edgy new offerings and live music. To keep up with demand, they boosted seating to 150 and turn out 30-40 briskets, 60 racks of ribs, and eight or more pork butts daily. Even at that, they still run out of something almost every day.

Over the years I have known no one who has eats at Stanley's more (virtually every week) than my long-time friend and local historian, James Wilkins. Forget award-winning ribs and funky sandwiches. James orders turkey. "The seasoning and smokiness gives it a indescribable taste," he says. "Stanley's is such a quirky place, they should call it 'quirky turkey.'"

To James and to me, there's something special about Stanley's. The place goes way back. It's full of smoke and history and love. "Nick and Jen work hard to create a unique eating experience that really honors what's gone on before," James adds. "That's my idea of a true Texas success story."

Stanley's Famous Pit Bar-B-Q is at 525 S. Beckham Ave. in Tyler. Call 903/593-0311;

www.stanleysfamous.com.

RESOURCES:

--Nick Pencis; nick@stanleysfamous.com

--James Wilkins

--<http://www.texasmonthly.com/lists/50-best-bbq-joints-world>

--<http://www.tmbbq.com/texass-best-bbq-sandwiches/>