Burns BBQ’s secret isn’t the sauce, it’s the ‘regulars’

By J.C. REID

URING the past few years, tragedy has befallen some of Houston’s best-known barbecue joints. Dreshler’s BBQ quietly closed its doors a few years ago. Williams Smokehouse burned down in 2007, never to reopen. The original Thelma’s BBQ on Live Oak Street burned down in 2009, only to be resurrected at a new location on Scott Street. And just this past March, Virgie’s Bar-B-Que, a relatively under-the-radar joint in west Houston that was highly regarded by barbecue aficionados, closed due to a fire (the owners plan to reopen).

But one of the more surprising closings happened last May, when the venerable Burns BBQ suddenly closed with little explanation (“closed due to repairs” the sign said). Although the founder and patriarch, Roy Burns Sr., had passed away a few months earlier, Burns BBQ had continued to serve up barbecue to devoted customers at the De Priest Street location in the Acres Homes area of Houston. Burns told us that the location had closed because of violations found during a health code inspection. This wasn’t surprising, considering how hard it is for any barbecue joint to satisfy health department requirements. (The nature of the barbecuing cooking process — with inordinate amounts of smoke, fire and soot — can make it difficult to keep the surfaces in a barbecue restaurant as clean as the health department requires.) At the time, I talked to Kathy Braden, owner and daughter of Roy Burns Sr., and she assured me that they would reopen in a few weeks after extensive repairs. But weeks turned into months, and people began to wonder if it would reopen at all.

Then, last summer, Burns BBQ reopened in a new location on North Shepherd near Little York. Although the old De Priest location oozed character with its tiny order counter/waiting room, picnic tables out front and an old-school, falling-apart barbecue shack feel, the new location is a big improvement. There’s a big parking lot and a spacious ordering area in a tidy, brightly painted building. There are a few tables along one side, and even more individual chairs lined up side-by-side along the opposite wall where customers wait for to-go orders (Burns is mostly a take-out joint).

The barbecue at Burns is not the best in Houston, by my estimation. The brisket is invariably dry, often with little smoke flavor (I think the brisket here is mainly used to fill the chopped beef sandwiches that are drenched in sauce). The ribs are tasty, though sometimes chewy and far from “falling-off-the-bone” tender. But what do I know? On a recent Saturday afternoon, as I sat and waited for my order, I watched a steady stream of patrons collect plate after plate of Burns’ barbecue to go. Surely with this volume of business, they must be doing something right.

Of course, barbecue, like just about everything else, is a matter of personal taste. Some people prefer a certain style of barbecue, whether its the pork goodness of North Carolina, the beef-centric approach of central Texas or the Southern-inspired, sauce-driven barbecue made famous by the African-American pitmasters of east Texas (Roy Burns Sr. being one of the most famous purveyors of this style in Houston). More objectively, Burns BBQ has garnered several notable awards over the years, the most prominent of which is being named to Texas Monthly’s latest list of the Top 50 Texas barbecue joints.

A little-known story about Burns BBQ features, of all people, Anthony Bourdain, the bad-boy former chef best known for the Travel Channel’s food/travel show No Reservations. In the second season of his first widely viewed series, A Cook’s Tour on the Food Network, Bourdain made his first and only visit to Houston to film a segment for an episode exploring the great debate over barbecue variations. The one place he chose to visit was Burns BBQ. (You can check it out on YouTube.) So depending on your taste in barbecue, you may find Burns to be great, average or just plain mediocre. I’m in the “average” camp when it comes to Burns’ barbecue staples such as brisket and ribs, but there are a few menu items that make a visit worthwhile. First, the aforementioned chopped brisket sandwich is big and tasty, with mounds of brisket soaked in a not-too-sweet barbecue sauce. Also the house-made sausage links are a rich, meaty, spicy delight. But one of the most interesting things on Burns’ menu isn’t even on the menu.

Many years ago, during one of my first visits to the old Burn location, I was sitting at an outside picnic table waiting for my order. There was one other fellow at an adjacent table, eating his way through a big container of pulled pork ribs. As my order arrived, he got up and brought his container over and set it on my table. “You want my regular?” he asked. “I can’t eat all these.”

I had no idea what ‘regulars’ were, but not wanting to appear like a barbecue neophyte I replied, “Sure I love regulars!” And that’s how I learned about one of the oldest traditions in Houston barbecue.

Regulars are the leftover trimmings of pork spare ribs that are saved and cooked alongside the main slabs of ribs in the barbecue smoker. The term “regulars” is perhaps an abbreviation of “irregulars,” as in “irregular cuts” of pork rib trimmings. In other barbecue traditions, these pork rib trimmings are known a “rib tips” or “tasters.” Leftover or throwaway cuts of meat have a long history in other styles of barbecue, too. “Burnt ends” are well-known in Kansas City style barbecue; in fact these chunks of charred-to-a-crisp fat and brisket meat are considered a delicacy.

As far as I know, Burns is the only barbecue joint in Houston that still serves regulars (they’re not on the menu, so you have to ask for them). The main draw of regulars, in my experience, is the value. You get a huge styrofoam container piled high with pork rib trimmings for about $8. Although there is a lot of meat to be had in a pile of regulars, you have to work to get it. A lot of the ribs chunks are either filled with inedible gristle and cartilage or cooked to a crisp. But patient work often will yield succulent chunks of pork rib meat and well-rendered fat.

With the resurrection of Burns and Thelma’s and, hopefully, the return of Virgie’s, Houston continues to nurture its long-standing tradition of Southern-style barbecue. And the emergence of relative newcomers like Pierson’s and Gatlin’s should help strengthen that tradition. Houston may not have the breadth and depth of the central Texas barbecue meccas such as Lockhart and Taylor, but if you know what to order and where to find it, great barbecue can still be had in Houston.


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