

FORK IN THE ROAD

'Epicenter' of barbecue

A tasting tour dives into the history and sheer joy of Kansas City's signature dish

PHOTOS AND STORY
BY KATHERINE
RODEGHIER

Special to Tribune Newspapers

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — The white cloud billowing from the smoker stings the eyes if you get too close, but few diners can resist craning their necks for a glimpse of the golden meats glistening inside.

Pitmaster Mark O'Bryan mops the sweat from his face and pokes a slab of ribs slowly roasting over the coals. Clearly a man who knows his work, he's been a pitmaster for 25 years, the last nine at Woodyard Bar-B-Que, featured on food television's "Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives" and "Anthony Bourdain: No Reservations." It's one of more than 100 barbecue joints in metropolitan Kansas City, and one of four we're visiting this afternoon on KC Barbecue Tours.

Kansas City "is the epicenter of the barbecue universe," says Carolyn Wells, executive director of the Kansas City Barbecue Society, and it combines all the barbecue styles in the United States. "We're the melting pot of barbecue." Unlike barbecue in Tennessee and Texas, it doesn't emphasize one kind of meat. "If it moves, we cook it," she jokes.

Barbecue began in the Carolinas with colonists who brought hogs because they were hardy enough to withstand the ocean voyage and foraged for food on their own when they landed. Native Americans taught the new arrivals to smoke the meat and use vinegar and peppers to preserve and season it.

As pioneers moved west, barbecue followed and evolved. Memphis, Tenn., became famous for ribs, Texas for beef brisket. Cooked slowly at low temperature for hours, barbecuing is hard work, and the job was handed to slaves on Southern plantations. Freed slaves brought their skills north, and in Kansas City, a meatpacking center, barbecue flourished.

Until KC Barbecue Tours opened in February, visitors who wanted to discover Kansas City barbecue were on their own. Now they taste 'cue at four restaurants and learn the back story of barbecue with some Kansas City lore thrown in for seasoning.

Kansas City firefighter Karl Schemel, who grew up in Hinsdale, Ill., and played football at Hinsdale Central, runs the tours with his wife, Bethanie, using a bus affectionately known as Riblet. The first stop is Arthur Bryant's original restaurant. Bethanie narrates along the way.

"There's a long-standing food war between Arthur Bryant's and Gates Bar-B-Que," says Bethanie, and both trace their roots to Henry Perry, who brought barbecue to Kansas City in 1907. Perry served any meats he could get his hands on — pork, opossum, woodchuck, beef — from a cart set up in an alley in the garment district. As business grew, Perry hired brothers Charlie and Arthur Bryant. When Perry died, Charlie Bryant took over the business, handing it over to Arthur upon retirement.

The restaurant was near a former ballpark and popularized by radio announcers who commented on air that they could smell the meat cooking. In 1974, journalist Calvin Trillin wrote a *Playboy* magazine article, calling Arthur Bryant's "possibly the single best restaurant in the world." Business soared, proving that "people really do read the articles in *Playboy*," Bethanie jokes.

Like most barbecue joints, the decor is decidedly downscale, with cus-



Tourists with KC Barbecue Tours are offered platters of barbecue for family-style eating at one of six Gates Bar-B-Q restaurants.



The pit crew opens the smoker at LC's Bar-B-Q to rotate the meat and slather on sauce.



Karl Schemel, co-owner of KC Barbecue Tours, portions out the barbecue for tour members at LC's Bar-B-Q.

tomers lining up at a counter and sitting at laminate tables on vinyl chairs. The crowd is a mix of businesspeople and laborers, locals and out-of-towners. We sit down to plates of smoked turkey, ribs and beans and choose from three kinds of sauce in squeeze bottles.

Kansas City barbecue stands out for its sauces, which are tomato-based and a bit sweet, says Bethanie, and for burnt ends,

those charred tender pieces of meat from the flat end of a brisket. Arthur Bryant doled out ends to appease hungry patrons waiting in line.

"He created burnt ends, but LC perfected them," says Bethanie, as we make our way to our next stop, LC's Bar-B-Q.

If you believe the maxim that the grungier the joint, the better the 'cue, then LC's is for you. Bethanie



Woodyard Bar-B-Que serves the only burnt-ends chili in the Kansas City area. Its sausage is 20 percent bacon.

As pioneers moved west, barbecue followed and evolved. Memphis, Tenn., became famous for ribs, Texas for beef brisket.

warns us to watch our step because the floors are slick from a film of grease coating the tiles. The smoker belches from one end of the room. At LC's, all the meats are flame-broiled, and the burnt ends are "barked up" — burned to ebony. We sample some: fatty, tender meat with a satisfying crunchy crust slathered in sweet sauce.

LC's began with just three tables. When the liquor store next door closed, it expanded into the space, adding six more. One table serves as the office of owner L.C. Richardson, who usually sits watching

TV and keeping an eye on business.

Between restaurants, we tour the city. As we cruise the jazz district, Bethanie tells us it was nicknamed the "Paris of the Plains" during Prohibition, because the corrupt mayor kept liquor flowing in brothels and 50 jazz clubs. Count Basie would take an order of Arthur Bryant's ribs to his gigs and spit on them so no one would eat them between sets.

We cross into Kansas for a stop at Woodyard Bar-B-Que at the Southside Wood Co. While selling wood, the owner gave away barbecue

If you go

Woodyard Bar-B-Que, 3001 Merriam Lane, Kansas City, Kan.; 913-362-8000; woodyardbbq.com

Arthur Bryant's original location, 1727 Brooklyn Ave., Kansas City, Mo.; 816-231-1123; arthurbryantsbbq.com

LC's Bar-B-Q, 5800 Blue Parkway, Kansas City, Mo.; 816-923-4484; tinyurl.com/lcbarbq

Gates Bar-B-Q, six locations, gatesbbq.com

KC Barbecue Tours, 800-979-3370, kcbarbecue.com. A four-hour afternoon tour of four restaurants for as many as 16 people is \$65 per person. A three-hour BYOB evening tour of three restaurants launches in February for \$55 each.

to customers. The food became so popular, he opened the restaurant. Trays for our group hold potato salad, chicken wings, the Woodyard's signature burnt ends, chili and sausage that is 20 percent bacon.

Before our last barbecue stop, we tour Original Juan, a specialty bottling company that makes more than 1,000 sauces, including some of the hottest. We sample a few, but no one is game for The Source, touted as the world's hottest at 7.1 million Scoville units. The gift shop sells a 1-ounce bottle for \$90.

We enter one of Gates Bar-B-Q's six restaurants, a chain that started in 1946, when George Gates bought O' Kentucky Bar-B-Q. The pitmaster was Arthur Pinkard, who worked along with the Bryant brothers for the legendary Henry Perry. Gates credited Pinkard for teaching him how to make the best barbecue, and the battle with Bryant began. Some barbecue fans say the secret is in the sauce, and Gates has four varieties. We test them on platters of ribs, turkey, brisket and beans served family style.

Sated and back on the bus, Bethanie asks for a show of hands. "Are you Bryant's or Gates guys?"

It's an even split; the great KC barbecue debate goes on.

ctc-travel@tribune.com