



Photography ANDREW THOMAS LEE

Snow's BBQ plate of pork steak and ribs, sausage, pickles, smoked chicken, brisket and bread with pinto beans and potato salad. Opposite: Miguel Vidal of Valentina's Tex Mex BBQ, Austin, Texas.

THE BIG SMOKE

Where there's smoke, there's barbecue in Central Texas. SHANE MITCHELL heads to the finest pits for breakfast tacos, Sunday barbacoa and a whole lot of brisket.



Tourists start lining up outside Franklin Barbecue in East Austin before dawn. The restaurant provides camp chairs for the wait, which can take up to half the day as a line stretches around the teal-and-white low-rise building. Some customers pack their own coolers. Others bring their dogs. Pitmaster Aaron Franklin has tapped into a universal craving for smoked meats, and his franchise includes cookbooks, a music festival, side hustles with other local chefs, a pending line of backyard barbecue pits and a television show (my favourite episode: *Pickin' Beef*). He's camera-ready and smokes a quality brisket.

But this first morning in Central Texas I'm searching for a breakfast taco, and I drive past Franklin on my way to a food truck deep in South Austin. On an unpaved roadside lot surrounded by auto-repair shops and hair salons, Valentina's Tex Mex BBQ also has a line, but those standing in it are on their way to work, and concentrating on the menu-board rather than posting selfies. Owner Miguel Vidal named one of his pits Chino after the lead singer of alt-metal band Deftones. The firebox glows with resinous mesquite coals. A sign on the trailer reads "hecho con amor". Another lauds the collaboration with a sixth-generation rancher.

The day's special is a smoked-sausage machaca taco, but I'm here for The Real Deal Holyfield. (Based on a nickname for the heavyweight champ, it's also slang for being legit.) Hand-rolled flour tortillas are layered with a fried egg, potatoes, beans, bacon, tomato-serrano salsa, and a choice of smoked brisket or pulled pork. Indecision can be dangerous on a barbecue line, so I ask for one of each. A guy wearing a "thin blue line" gimme cap sits down at the next table with a plate rib as big as a tomahawk and my eyes pop. He invites me over for a bite, and we trade notes about where to go for lunch.

Other regions of America's Barbecue Belt celebrate the hog, but here in cattle country it's all about the beeves. Central Texas pit-style cooking emerged during the 19th century as European immigrants, primarily Czech and German, brought their sausage-making and other meat-preservation traditions to Hill Country. The barbecue that evolved in settlement towns surrounding Austin and San Antonio was plainly seasoned with salt and pepper and cooked with indirect heat. The sauce or the sides didn't matter as much as the quality of the cut, the character of the smoke, and the thickness of the "bark", the crust that forms on barbecued meat.

To the south lies Mexican barbacoa, wrapped in maguey leaves and buried in hot coals; to the west, "cowboy style" direct-heat grilling. Deeper history dates back to the Caddo Indians who cooked game over wood fires 10,000 years ago. In no way a footnote, credit also falls to African-American slaves who manned pits during epic barbecues involving whole steers. Juneteenth, the holiday commemorating emancipation in Texas, has been celebrated with a barbecue since 1865. ▶



Above: sign outside Valentina's Tex Mex BBQ, and (from top) its smoked-brisket taco with guacamole and tomato-serrano salsa and The Real Deal Holyfield taco.



Clockwise from above: Franklin Barbecue pitmaster Aaron Franklin; its sold-out sign; Franklin plate of bread, pinto beans, potato salad, coleslaw, smoked turkey, brisket, pork ribs, sausage, pickles and pulled pork; and the restaurant's queue.



Diners at Garcia's Mexican Food.



By the time I make it back to Franklin the line has thinned. The staff point me around the back to a picnic table near the pre-order pick-up window, and bring over a meat sampler on a blue cafeteria tray. Turkey, ribs, pulled pork. Two slices of brisket: one lean, one fatty. The Franklin oeuvre, as it were. During a regular month, open six days a week until “sold out”, the restaurant serves about 18 tonnes of Angus beef. Sausage is made in-house from fresh meat trimmings.

“Light snacks,” says Aaron Franklin, sitting down opposite me and eyeing my plate. “Get the barky piece on the end.”

Austin’s 42-year-old “chief smokologist” wears brawny black-framed specs and keeps a Craftsman toolbox in his restored 1951 Spartanette “canned ham” trailer. It serves as his office on a patio behind the smokehouse, where five 3785-litre offset cookers belch meat-fragrant smoke from exhaust stacks. One is named Muchacho. He also has a welding shop, where the equipment he designs is manufactured from upcycled propane tanks. A proclaimed do-it-yourselfer, Franklin is comfortable discussing fluid dynamics and sustainable ranching. The native Texan taught himself to barbecue as well: “About 16 or 17 years ago, I called up my dad and asked, ‘So how do I cook this thing? Got this brisket, some wood lying around.’ And he said, ‘Cook it ’til it’s black. Must be done.’ That was the standard, doesn’t matter if it was tender, just cook until it looks like a hockey puck, scrape off the fat, slice it real thin, drench it in a bunch of sauce. That’s what I knew as a kid.”

He has been in the vanguard of change, sourcing meat processed ethically and seasoning post oak for up to a year.

“All heat is not the same,” he says. “My cookers have a massive amount of airflow, they have a huge chimney and giant firebox, and they’re built for one thing, and it’s brisket. I designed them to cook the way I wanted to cook.”

After a long meat nap I head to South Congress, SoCo for short, a neighbourhood crammed with cocktail bars, hipster brands, upscale food trucks and tattoo artists. SoCo is also home to The Continental Club. Austin is best known as the spiritual centre for nonconformist cosmic cowboys Willie Nelson and Steve Earle but, back in the day, it was also a touring stop for other Texas-born greats such as Janis Joplin and Townes Van Zandt. Of the hundreds of live-music joints and festivals, including Austin City Limits and SXSW, The Continental Club has seen it all. The place opened its doors in 1955,

and the bar back is plastered with handbills and autographed memorabilia. Stevie Ray Vaughan played here. So did Junior Brown and Robert Plant.

The stage is a tight squeeze. When Jon Dee Graham gets up for his regular Wednesday set, he grins at the boozy audience clutching brown bottles of Lone Star. “We’re the best band in a 12-block radius,” he says, as a stage crew adjusts the lights. He’s not known much beyond the city limits, but the gravelly-voiced guitarist grinds through a repertoire that has made him a local legend. His *Tamale House #1* references another of Austin’s wonderfully dubious institutions.

The next morning, I’m first in line at Micklethwait Craft Meats, housed in a vintage Comet trailer not far from Franklin. The key word here is craft. Everything is prepared in-house, including scratch sides and the squishy white bread. (That’s a point of pride.) Tom Micklethwait started out as a baker, and turned to smoking meats in 2012. His pit crew is flipping baby backs. The pulled lamb is a revelation.

A guy wearing a Liberty Barbecue snapback sits next to me with an order of the brisket Frito pie. In case you haven’t figured this out yet, everyone envies other customers’ plates. Frito pie is Central Texas junk food at its finest, originally a game-day snack for the nosebleed bleachers, a foil bag of salty corn chips ripped open with canned chili and cheese poured on top. Micklethwait’s version is stoner food par excellence, so I get back in line to pack out for a friend’s tailgate party. On Thursday nights in Texas, the junior varsity gets a crack at glory. Fridays are reserved for championship teams, but I’m a fan of marching-band practice and underdogs running passes on the field under floodlights.

Only an hour’s drive south, San Antonio is older than Austin, with deeper Hispanic roots and culture. The city celebrated its 300th birthday last year. A few years back, the two cities had a well-documented breakfast-taco war. It was a take-no-prisoners class struggle as each squared off over origin claims, with much invective slung and salsa spilled. Per capita, however, San Antonio has more taquerias and tortillerias, so in the minds of its citizens it was no contest. Let’s put it this way: no one sits in the drive-thru window line at The Original Donut Shop, opened in 1950, for the hot glazed sinkers. (Ask for the egg and bacon taco instead.)

The same squabble applies to slow-cooked and smoky meats. In San Antonio’s high-concept restaurants, this may be construed as smoked duck ham and whipped pork butter at Cured, braised bison short rib at Signature, or the pastrami sandwich and ▶

“Cook it ’til it’s black. Must be done.’ That was the standard, doesn’t matter if it was tender, just cook until it looks like a hockey puck. That’s what I knew as a kid.”



“Barbecue isn’t just throwing meat on fire. That pit is your canvas. All the meat that you put in there is your work of art.”



beef clod at The Granary 'Cue & Brew. Then there are the homier cuts, like the glorious chorizo wrapped in a charred tortilla at Carnitas Lonja and the asada con nopales at Mama's Kitchen. A converted gas station lined with vintage portraits of fighting cocks and their handlers, Garcia's Mexican Food has been open for breakfast and lunch since 1962, and the waitresses hustle along tables, impatient with chitchat. Two thick slices of fatty brisket wrapped in a fresh tortilla is meaty minimalism, but if owner John Garcia decides to send out the off-menu brisket nachos topped with creamy guacamole and molten cheese, it's a lucky day. The right drink order is a Big Red, the cream soda that tastes like liquefied bubblegum.

“There is no basement at The Alamo.” The farcical film *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* pivots on a plot twist during a guided tour at The Alamo, originally known as the Misión San Antonio de Valero, a fortified compound founded by 18th-century Spanish missionaries. The church and its grounds are better remembered for a pivotal moment in Texas history, as taught in schools here, glorifying the “come and take it” last stand of its Texan colonial defenders during the siege by Mexican



general Antonio López de Santa Anna that ended on 6 March 1836. (Before Texas became a short-lived republic, and then a state, it belonged to Mexico.) Walking through the quiet inner chambers of The Alamo with other visitors on a Friday morning, the shifting politics of border culture come into focus.

Pitmaster Esaul Ramos was born in San Antonio. His parents were from Mexico. He attended family barbecues as a child and trained under John Lewis at LeAnn Mueller's La Barbecue in Austin. That's resumé royalty. Three years ago, Ramos found his own spot for sale on Craigslist in the Lower Southeast Side near Pecan Valley. His 2M Smokehouse is in a working-class neighbourhood, far from the River Walk and the Pearl historic districts, on a street lined with EZ Pawn, Speedy Cash and bodegas selling ice and bags of charcoal. He owns a single cooker. On the first Sunday of the month he prepares barbacoa, braised beef cheeks wrapped in banana leaves, and it sells out in minutes.

“San Antonio is big on barbacoa,” Ramos says. “I had it growing up every Sunday. I'm proud of my culture, my heritage.” We stand outside the screened shed as his assistant, Dusty, turns briskets wrapped in brown butcher's paper. Ramos' Tex-Mex sides include mac and cheese topped with crackling chicharrones and “borracho” beans, but what makes him truly ►



Clockwise from top left: the smoker at 2M Smokehouse; mac and cheese with chicharrones (top left), turkey, sausage, pork ribs, brisket, pickles and potato salad at 2M Smokehouse; street scene in Austin. Opposite, from left: Esaul Ramos of 2M Smokehouse; inside Mission Espada, San Antonio.

happy are the Oaxaca cheese-serrano pork links he hands me to taste.

“Barbecue isn’t just throwing meat on fire,” he says. “That pit is your canvas. All the meat that you put in there is your work of art.”

Early Saturday mornings, the world comes to Lexington, population 1202. From San Antonio it’s a breezy two-hour drive through rolling pastureland. Cacti with names like Horse Crippler and Pink Fairyduster grow on the shoulder, monarch butterflies flutter across the windshield. Close to Lockhart, State Highway 21 overlaps remnants of the Chisholm Trail and El Camino Real de los Tejas, two of the most storied byways in cowboy lore. A turn onto Highway 77 leads to the ranching town where a weekend cattle auction takes place at the Livestock Commission and, a few blocks away opposite a grain silo, billowing smoke signals the whereabouts of Snow’s BBQ, currently the top-rated pit in Texas.

Tootsie Tomanetz pokes coals with a hoe and kicks the steel door on a firebox funnelling smoke over sausage links tied with butcher’s twine. A sturdy woman with heavily muscled arms and cropped white hair, she grew up behind the counter at her family’s meat market before shifting to tend pits in 1966. During the week she still works as a school custodian. She has lectured at the annual Camp Brisket sponsored by Texas A&M University’s Department of Animal Science, and she treasures the curved meat tongs her son-in-law welded back together more than once because she doesn’t want a new pair. The title on her business card: First Lady of Texas BBQ.

“I wouldn’t have opened this place if she hadn’t agreed to come work,” says owner Kerry Bexley, who built the pits on days off from his job at an aluminium plant. He unwraps brisket and slices it with an electric knife. “Our town people aren’t all that forgiving. If you get one thing that’s subpar, they won’t come back.”

A truck pulls up with a wild pig in a cage on the flatbed. Hunters wearing camouflage snake boots stand in the order-line on the porch. More customers sit at picnic tables under a tin shed decorated with fringed plastic streamers, eating pork steaks for breakfast. Tomanetz opens the lid on another smoker and shows me racks filled with chicken. It’s her specialty. A little salt, a little pepper, a smear of sauce for honesty.

“Why Saturdays only?” I ask.

Tomanetz wipes her eyes, tearing from the smoke.

“Since I was a little bitty girl, Lexington has always been noted to have barbecue on Saturdays, because the farmers and ranchers would bring their products to town then. Eggs, cream, bring the corn

in to get it ground, sell cattle at the livestock auction, everybody traded on Saturdays.

“And with a meat market, Saturday barbecue was the way you got rid of cuts that were older so you can start out with fresh meat on Monday. Back then, brisket was such a cheap cut of meat, so stringy and coarse, no flavour, you couldn’t get rid of a brisket.”

Tomanetz picks up a shovel to move coals around. “What will you eat for dinner tonight?”

The real-deal pitmaster smiles. “I go with a round or rib-eye.”

She returns to tending last orders. Snow’s closes at two in the afternoon, as game-day pre-shows start. Before leaving, I stop at the coin-operated Eagle Carwash on the outskirts of Lexington to rinse off the road dust, and notice a posted sign in the bay next to the sprayer.

It reads: “No BBQ pits.” ●

Snow’s BBQ in Lexington. Right, from top: “First Lady of Texas BBQ” Tootsie Tomanetz; Micklethwait Craft Meats, and its Frito pie with brisket (top left), pulled lamb, brisket, pickles, lemon poppy slaw, mac and cheese, bread and sausage.



Getting there

Qantas, Delta and United fly one stop between Austin and Sydney, and select Australian capitals.

Top 'cue

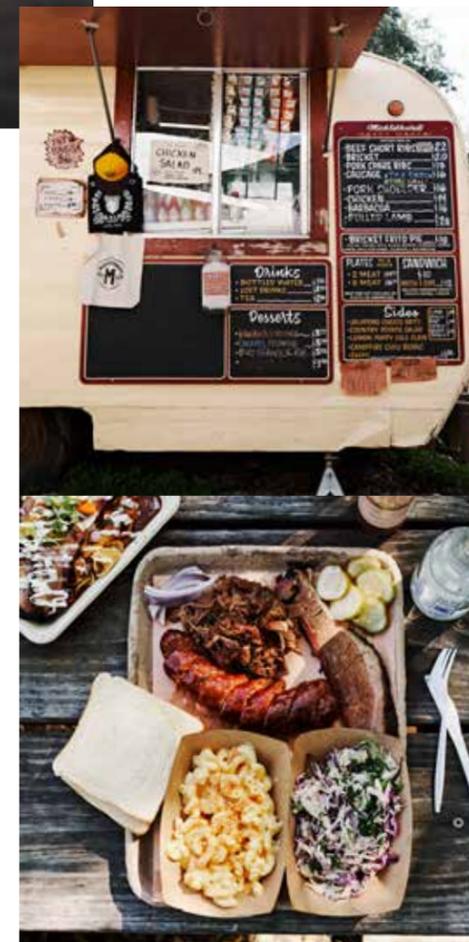
2M Smokehouse Barbacoa on the first Sunday of the month. 2731 S.

WW White Rd, San Antonio, +1 210 885 9352, 2msmokehouse.com

Franklin Barbecue Skip the line: order online, picnic elsewhere. 900 E. 11th St, Austin, +1 512 653 1187, franklinbbq.com

The Granary 'Cue & Brew Get the pastrami. 602 Avenue A, San Antonio, +1 210 228 0124, thegranarysa.com

La Barbecue LeAnn Mueller is barbecue royalty. Her urban food-truck brisket in



Austin is badass. 2027 E. Cesar Chavez St, Austin, +1 512 605 9696, labarbecue.com

Micklethwait Craft Meats Order Frito pie and pulled lamb. And all the sides.

All of them. 1309 Rosewood Ave, Austin, +1 512 791 5961, craftmeatsaustin.com

Snow’s BBO Open Saturdays only. 516 Main St, Lexington, +1 979 773 4640, snowsbbq.com

Valentina’s Tex Mex BBQ Breakfast tacos and beef ribs. 11500 Manchaca Rd, Austin, +1 512 221 4248, valentinastextmexbbq.com

Eat

Cured Steve McHugh’s all-meat bonanza. 306 Pearl Parkway, San Antonio, +1 210 314 3929, curedatpearl.com

Otoko Hamachi seared over binchotan charcoal paired with smoked tamari is as close as Yoshi Okai gets to barbecue, but he’s also a bandmate of Tom Micklethwait. 1603 S. Congress Ave, Austin, +1 512 920 6405, otokoatx.com

Garcia’s Mexican Food Beg for the brisket nachos. 842 Fredericksburg Rd, San Antonio, +1 210 735 4525

Mixtli Wildly creative food lab in a converted boxcar that dives deep into Tejano culinary history. 5251 McCullough Ave, San Antonio, +1 210 338 0746, restaurantmixtli.com

The Original Donut Shop Breakfast tacos to go. 3307 Fredericksburg Rd, San Antonio, +1 210 734 5661

El Paraiso Paletas ice-pop flavours such as pickle and chilli pepper are the perfect cool-down after barbecue. 1934 Fredericksburg Rd, San Antonio, +1 210 737 8101

Carnitas Lonja Get the chorizo taco. 1107 Roosevelt Ave, San Antonio, +1 210 612 3626.

See and shop

The Continental Club Legendary live-music club. 1315 S. Congress Ave, Austin, +1 512 441 2444, continentalclub.com

J&J Spirits Encyclopedic temple of “brown water”, especially Texas whiskies. 1131 E. 11th St, Austin, +1 512 472 5328, jandjspirits.com

Detox

Two spas for meat naps:

Lake Austin Spa Resort 1705 S. Quinlan Park Rd, Austin, +1 512 372 7300, lakeaustin.com

La Cantera Resort & Spa and Signature restaurant 16641 La Cantera Parkway, San Antonio, +1 210 558 6500, lacanteraresort.com

Stay

Hotel Eleven On the same street as Franklin Barbecue. 1123 E. 11th St, Austin, +1 512 675 0011, hotelelevenaustin.com

Hotel Emma At the heart of the Pearl district. 136 E. Grayson St, San Antonio, +1 210 448 8300, thehotelemma.com