

Barbecue Crew

Happiness is spelled B-B-Q

Steve Sweeney knows his barbecue. There is no brisket or pork he is not ready to sample. His hunger for the best in smoked meats, and some male bonding, keeps him and his group of friends on the road every summer touring some of America's great barbecue hot spots.

Since 1999, Steve and his band of brothers have taken a break from their jobs for their own "barbecuepalooza"—a three- or four-day road trip to kick back with friends and tantalize the taste buds. The idea for a barbecue tour came about as just that—a way to spend time with old friends—men who take their B-B-Q very seriously.

"I guess the idea came from the original *Texas Monthly* article about the top 50 barbecue places in Texas," says Steve. "I think that came out in '97 and I read that with some interest...and I put it in a drawer. A couple of years later in early spring, I was looking for something to do and opened that drawer and there it was. I said, 'You know I'm going to get some of the old fellows together from high school and college, and see if they want to go on a road trip for some barbecue.'"

The crew has not looked back...sampling beef, pork, sausage, and sauce (washed down with a couple beers), from North Carolina to Kansas City to the Texas Gulf Coast. The group has a set of guidelines they follow, including no chain restaurants, and the meat must be slow-cooked by a wood-burning fire. Mom-and-pop craft barbecue joints are ideal. Each participant logs his opinion on the establishments, and results are posted on the group's website, www.bbqtours.com.

Since their first tour, Steve and his group have had a steady core of six or eight participating, with a few more on occasion. So far, the idea is to keep the annual tour a "just for buds" event, but Steve has occasionally thought about making it a commercial venture. "It's one of those things that we've talked about every year, but after doing it now for 11 years, we've decided that we're going to leave it alone," he says. "There are parts of this I could see packaging up for consumer sale, but even if that happened, I couldn't see myself on the consumer end, the tourism end. I'd need to get somebody else to do that.

"With me, it's all about the barbecue. I do a lot of the research and development. I like going out and scouting places, and then we roll them into the tour. We go out and do a three-day tour every year, and we eat at six or seven places a day."

For Steve, barbecue has been a lifelong love, and he talks about the subject with the passion of a father talking about his newborn



Barbecue Crew (from left): Darin "Wildman" Barrow, Steve "Smoke Daddy" Sweeney, Doug "Double Boner" Barrow, Kevin "K-Dawg" McReynolds, Bill "XO" Karau, Greg "Doc" Johnson, and Chris "FU" Flynn.



son. "I think growing up in Texas, barbecue marked some of the major events in my life." He recalls, "My high school graduation had catered barbecue, my college graduation was the same, and my wife and I had barbecue and beer at our wedding."

Two years into the tours, Steve found barbecue owners and pit-masters willing to share some of their secrets. "They're proud of what they do and they don't get a chance to crow very often," he says. "That's one of the neat things about these tours is talking to folks who have been doing this so long. And after a few tours we thought, 'This isn't rocket science, we could probably do this.'"

The men bought a traditional wood-fired smoker and began cooking their own barbecue at tailgate parties, like at the University of Texas football

games in Austin. And at the urging of a friend at Arapaho United Methodist Church, they cooked 200 pounds of barbecue for a youth group mission trip fundraiser. "We had a whole lot of barbecue left over, but the people there were clamoring for more and kept asking if they could take some home with them. We ended up selling by the pound and sold a lot."

The next year, the group sold barbecue solely by the pound, making the "Big Smoke" the largest fundraiser the group ever had. The Smoke is now held every year for the mission trip. This year was the seventh fundraiser and the men cooked 1,300 pounds of meat, about four complete days of cooking, and raised between \$4,000 and \$5,000 toward the trip.

As for Steve's favorite tour stop so far, he lists North Carolina and Central Texas as two of the best. In North Carolina, the crew stopped for some barbecue and attended minor league baseball games at each town. "A large part of the tour during the day is about the barbecue, but in the evenings, we like to kick back, relax and reflect on the day, and think about what tomorrow might bring," he says. "Central Texas, for anybody who hasn't experienced its barbecue, you have to hit some of those places to really calibrate your system. There's some top-notch barbecue.

North Carolina, I really liked that tour because of the style of barbecue they do; it's so different from what we do here, but at the core is very, very similar. It's all pork, all the time. It's kind of neat because you can look at Texas barbecue and say 'I've had that,' but there are as many as five distinct styles within Texas. In North Carolina, there's really east and there's west. If you're in eastern North Carolina, they cook whole hog over coals. And that is one of the things that I really enjoy—the traditional way of pit cooking barbecue as a craft."





These “barbecue brothers” visited a restaurant in North Carolina where one cook has manned the pits for 30 years, and Steve worries there may not be pitmasters to take these craftsmen’s places. He’s worried about some looking to make it “better, faster, cheaper,” as opposed to the traditional methods. “It’s an art, a craft, and it’s a dying art.”

In the meantime, the barbecue tours will live on including this summer’s trip to the Piney Woods. The tour will take them through Lufkin, Nacogdoches, and Hemphill, through three national forests, and to an old friend’s lake house, where they’ll be staying, on Lake Livingston. Says Steve, “We’ll get a chance to socialize with some friends we’ve had since high school.”

Along with great barbecue, that is the essence of these tours—spending time with old friends and taking it easy. Pass the sauce, please.

For more information, including detailed reviews of barbecue joints across the country, visit www.bbqtours.com. ■

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