

LIFESTYLE / FOOD

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Cross-country research rates great barbecue

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Greg went West and Vince headed East. Between them, they logged almost 40,000 miles checking out nearly 700 barbecue joints and consuming enough calories "to power a Buick up Pike's Peak."

And now Greg Johnson and Vince Staten are here to tell you about the joys and owners of the 100 best barbecue joints in the country, the secrets to sauces, what pits are best ("gas grills are a prissy way to make barbecue"), plus recipes for side dishes like Mama's hot and greasy fried pies. It's all in *Real Barbecue* (Harper & Row, \$8.95).

According to the introduction, "The best thing to do with a book about barbecue is wipe your hands on it. No matter how brilliant the prose (and some of it is darned brilliant), reading about barbecue is like hearing about a hot date: It's interesting, but it's nothing like being there."

For Austinites, being there is easy. Ten of those top hot spots are in Texas, five in Central Texas: Iron Works Official Texas BBQ in Austin, Southside Market in Elgin, Prause's Market in La Grange, Kreuz Market in Lockhart and Louis Mueller Barbecue in Taylor.

Making up the Texas 10 were Sonny Bryan's Smokehouse in Dallas, Angelo's in Fort Worth, Hammond's Bar-B-Q in Glen Rose, and Goode Company and Otto's in Houston.

To sneak more barbecue places in the book, they worked out a footnote system plugging other spots worth visiting if you are in the neighborhood. In this manner, they mentioned Stubb's in Austin, the City Market in Luling, and the East Street Dining and Social Club in Hutto.

"It was a cheap stunt to get in more than 100 places," Johnson explained in a telephone interview. "We didn't really eat a lot of bad barbecue."

In fact, he and his barbecue buddy Vince, both of whom are newspaper guys at the *The Courier-Journal* in Louisville, Ky., had a long list of good places that didn't even make the book. "We probably could have put out a book the size of ours (250 pages) on Texas alone."

They didn't eat at every barbecue joint in America. That would have been impossible, considering there are 6,412 barbecue restaurants in the United States. So, before they started on their year's eating spree, they sent out hundreds of letters to food and magazine editors all over the country soliciting their barbecue recommendations. They pared the list to 1,200 places, then culled it to 700. Finally, using the Mississippi River as a rough divider, they split the country in half and started eating — anonymously, like critics.

See Barbecue, E11

Barbecue From E1

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Was the meat tender? Was it flavorful? Was the sauce a perfect union with the meat? Was the service fast, cheerful? How did the atmosphere rate?

They gnawed ribs and sampled sandwiches, both hog and heifer. They checked wood stacks, sniffed smoke and observed cooks. They counted calendars on the wall. ("The more calendars,

the better the barbecue. Louie Mueller's in Taylor has a nine-calendar wall, and the brisket backs it up.")

They worked out a four-level scoring system: pretty good, good, real good, as good as we've ever eaten. (Kreuz Market, Sonny Bryan's and Hammond's were Texas places that merited the ultimate rating.)

Eating really good barbecue is not a bad way to spend a year, said Johnson, who gained 12 pounds, since lost, on his research. Vince did even better. He

went on a wellness program as he started researching the book and he only gained half a pound. His cholesterol level, well below 200, fluctuated only 1 point. (But it wasn't measured the day he downed 14 pork sandwiches.)

What may be just as amazing is that these fellows didn't give up their day jobs as newspaper editors while researching the book. They crammed the hundreds of barbecue morsels into long weekends and vacations.

When the barbecue enthusiasts returned home, often toting jars

of beloved sauces, they swapped notes and tested recipes for things like Acme Atomic Oil and the County Line's smoked tenderloin (included in the book).

Then they picked their 100 favorite spots. "First we convinced ourselves that a place belonged in the top 100. Then we convinced each other," Johnson said of the process.

"We don't claim our selection for the Hot 100 as the absolute last word. . . . If your favorite barbecue choice isn't on the list, don't despair. It could have been

having a bad day when we passed through. A good place can have a bad day, but a bad place can never have a good day. If you think there is a barbecue joint that is as good as you've ever had that we might have missed, write us at P.O. Box 30, Prospect, Ky. 40059.

"If we happened to miss some place, we honestly want to hear about it," Johnson said. "If this book does well, we have made a solemn pact to update it."

They are not burned out on barbecue.

They fixed it for the Fourth.