



Pushmataha Hall at Wheelock Academy, named for the famous Choctaw Chief, was completed in 1884. Originally built to house students and staff, the 10,000-square foot dormitory is the largest building on campus.

THE LOVELY BONES

By MEGAN ROSSMAN | Photography by MARK W. NAULT

IN ANY TOWN, there are a handful of buildings and other architectural skeletons that inspire possibilities in anyone who takes a second glance. Locals and passersby pick their favorites from the seemingly forgotten: the vacant apartments with the gingerbread trim; the abandoned hospital; the old church down the street. “Why doesn’t anyone fix this place up?” they ask.

The answer, of course, varies. Tax credits can be powerful incentive for developers to rehab historic spaces in and around metropolitan areas with populations that can support the businesses or residents inhabiting them.

“Historic preservation today is an important tool in community revitalization,” says deputy state historic preservation officer Melvena Heisch. “You only have to see Automobile Alley or the Skirvin Hotel in Oklahoma City to see what tax credits can do.”

But tax credits don’t necessarily hold the same appeal in rural areas, Heisch says. Finding financially viable reasons to renovate buildings—particularly large ones—can be an insurmountable task in small towns with shrinking populations and economic opportunities. In some cases, buildings remain standing because not only are they expensive to fix up, they’re expensive to tear down. And while owners may do what they can to maintain their property, a complete makeover is not always realistic.

Whether landmarks and lesser-knowns linger as faded relics or are refurbished to their full potential, the physical remains of Oklahoma’s past are etched in mortar and built in timber. The final home of the Comanches’ last chief, a mid-century ministry building, and the remnants of a stately hospital overlooking the Ouachita Mountains all serve as records of the people who have helped shape the state’s physical and cultural landscape.



WHEELOCK ACADEMY

Located near the southeastern Oklahoma town of Mil-lerton, Wheelock Academy was built by missionaries Alfred and Harriet Wright in 1833 for Choctaws who recently had been forced from their homelands in Mississippi. It was converted a decade later into the Wheelock Female Seminary, a learning institution for Choctaw girls. After a fire destroyed most of the buildings following the Civil War, tribal leaders reconstructed the campus in the 1880s. It eventually fell under the control of the United States government and was closed in 1955 before being transferred back to the tribe. Today, the Choctaw Nation offers regular tours of the campus, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and sometimes serves as a starting point of the annual Trail of Tears Commemorative Walk in May. *For information about tours, call (580) 746-2139.*

ABUNDANT LIFE

The Abundant Life building has been the recipient of much criticism for its alien exterior, but it's safe to say there's nothing else quite like it in Tulsa. Along with its scaly cream-colored façade, the most notable feature of the midcentury structure is its lack of windows, reportedly an energy-saving measure designed by architect Cecil Stanfield. This unique windowless design makes repurposing the building a challenge. Built as the headquarters of Oral Roberts Ministries in 1957, the building served as a sound stage for radio and television programming. After Oral Roberts University opened in Tulsa in 1965, Abundant Life was vacated—although it did briefly serve as an office for Southwestern Bell in the 1980s. *1720 South Boulder Avenue in Tulsa.*





WALCOURT

The Jacobethan Revival-style Walcourt building in northeast Oklahoma City was built in 1927 as luxury apartments outfitted with correspondingly high-end fixtures, appliances, and fine wood trims. Vacant for decades, it was damaged by fire in 2015 and has been a frequent victim of theft and vandalism. The property now is monitored closely by concerned neighborhood residents. Bryan Colbert, whose family owns the Walcourt, says they are in the beginning stages of renovating the National Historic Register landmark. *For more information about the Walcourt Restoration Group, visit est1927.wixsite.com/walcourt2016.*

EASTERN OKLAHOMA TUBERCULOSIS SANATORIUM

Located near Talihina, the Eastern Oklahoma Tuberculosis Sanatorium treated thousands of patients between 1921 and 1975. Several buildings remain intact on the campus of what now is the Talihina division of the Oklahoma Veterans Center. The grandest of these is the Harper building, constructed in classical revival style from red brick and limestone. It housed children suffering from or exposed to the dreaded consumption. *Two miles north of Talihina on State Highway 63A, (918) 567-2251 or odva.ok.gov/content/talihina.*





STAR HOUSE

Tucked behind a trading post and the remains of an amusement park in Cache, Star House, the former home of Quanah Parker, has had an uneasy existence since the famed Comanche chief built it around 1890. Herbert Woesner Jr. acquired the house from Parker's daughter Neda Parker Birdsong and moved it in 1958 to its current location. After Woesner's death in 2008, his nephew Wayne Gipson took over the property. The fragile condition of the house has been a subject of controversy for years. In 2015, the National Trust for Historic Preservation provided a grant to the Comanche Nation to assess the home. *Tours are available after 2 p.m. (580) 429-3420.*

THE WHY OF 'CUE

Smoked, pulled, rubbed, sauced, and chopped: Pitmasters transform everyday meat into barbecue, a food subculture all its own. These spots are a few of Oklahoma's best.

BY **MEGAN ROSSMAN**
PHOTOGRAPHY BY **LORI DUCKWORTH**

Located along Route 66, the Butcher BBQ Stand in Wellston is one of Oklahoma's newer barbecue destinations.

SIDE HUSTLE

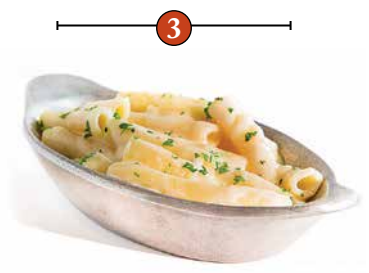
MEAT'S THE MAIN ATTRACTION, BUT THESE DESSERTS AND ACCOMPANIMENTS ARE IN A LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN.



1
STRAWBERRY-BANANA CAKE
A slice of yellow cake topped with sliced strawberries, layered with bananas, and drizzled in a sugar glaze completes every meal at Leo's BBQ in Oklahoma City.



2
GRILLED POTATO SALAD
This medley of Yukon baby yellow potatoes, onions, peppers, and bacon is mixed with salt, pepper, and mustard and grilled for a hot twist on the traditional dish at Burn Co. in Tulsa. (See the recipe on page 44.)



3
FANCY MAC & CHEESE
Ziti in a Gruyère cream sauce with parmesan is so good on its own, you may forget the entrée at Iron Star Urban Barbeque in Oklahoma City.

MEGAN ROSSMAN

LORI DUCKWORTH



Capable of feeding an entire family, the Meat Locker at the Butcher BBQ Stand comes with brisket, ribs, pulled pork, chicken, smoked sausage, smoked hot links, burnt ends, three sides, dessert, and bread.

BARBECUE. A MOUTHFUL of smoky meat—juices running over the tongue and down the chin—evokes a primordial satisfaction that is absolute and holy. Sometimes, just the smell is enough to spark carnivorous lust. Ask Randy Busby's Jack Russell terrier, Ms. Cookie.

"When we pull up in the parking lot, our dog knows we're at Smokin' Joe's, because she can smell it," says Busby, who lives not far from the Davis barbecue mecca. "She starts crying, and she doesn't do that at other restaurants. So we bring her her own brisket when we're done eating. If I'd let her, she would eat herself sick."

Approved by both pets and people, Smokin' Joe's Rib Ranch and RV Park in Davis is a must-stop for barbecue lovers traveling Interstate 35. In the summer, the restaurant goes through nine to ten thousand pounds of meat per week, feeding at least nine hundred people every day. Ribs and brisket are the most popular entrées, but there are many options to choose from, and they're all good. Pulled chicken, half chickens, pork tenderloin, pulled pork, bologna, smoked hot wings, and fiery hot links are a few choices that bring in the crowds. The smoked ribeye special, offered Friday and Saturday, imparts more than sixteen ounces of beef with flavor and tenderness so divine, it might bring tears of joy to even the most resolute carnivore's eyes.

So what makes this place so special? "We cook it fresh every day," says Coby Wells, who owns the restaurant with his dad Joe and runs it with his wife Bobbie. "We're smoking constantly. We babysit it. Everything takes a lot of attention and time."

Time is key, because barbecue is a waiting game. Briskets generally take ten to twelve hours to smoke; ribs, five to six; and processed meats like hot links and bologna usually take a few hours. "Low and slow" is a crucial mantra for tough cuts like brisket and ribs to retain moisture.

Like most barbequers, Wells is up before the sun rises, checking his Southern Pride-brand smokers, tending to mesquite or hickory fires with his father—the namesake Joe—and a few other helpers. His average workday is fourteen hours, but despite the intense labor, he and the staff donate their time and food for numerous fundraisers, particularly for local schools, and take an active interest in the well-being of regulars like Busby.

"Coby and Bobbie are amazing," Busby says. "I think anyone with hearts like theirs could serve dirt, and I would love it. But their food is spectacular."



WHAT CONSTITUTES BARBECUE of this caliber often is a subject of heated debate among enthusiasts. Is it the wood? The sauce? The smoker? The pitmaster?

"I've been in the industry for so long, I hear people make all sorts of subjective declarations," says Adam Myers, owner of Burn Co. near downtown Tulsa. "That's the thing about barbecue: There's no wrong or right way. It's just the way you like it."

If lunch lines stretching out the front door and countless national media mentions are any indication, Myers and his team are doing barbecue the way a lot of people like it. A visit to Burn Co. is a field trip into pyromancy and culinary creativity. Along with staples like pulled pork and brisket, diners can order sandwiches like the Fatty—Polish sausage surrounded by breakfast sausage and chopped hot links and wrapped in bacon—and non-smoked items like hamburgers, steaks, and sausages that include jalapeño cheddar, pork, and venison. Myers and company also will top off a burger with brisket or bologna if a diner so desires.

Myers, who spent twelve years working for Tulsa-based Hasty-Bake and counts its founder Grant Hastings as a mentor, cooks with the staff on eleven

SIDE HUSTLE

[CONTINUED]

MEAT'S THE MAIN ATTRACTION, BUT THESE DESSERTS AND ACCOMPANIMENTS ARE IN A LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN.



4 STRAWBERRIES ON A CLOUD
This dessert at Smokin' Joe's in Davis layers strawberries and creamy whipped topping over a light, fluffy confection.



5 CURLY Q FRIES
Crisp and golden, these fries are served in enormous heaps at Van's Pig Stands in Norman, Shawnee, Moore, and Purcell.



6 APPLE PIE BBQ BEANS
David Bouska learned this recipe from a woman he met on the barbecue competition circuit. Apple pie filling blended with baked beans and spices make this one of Butcher BBQ Stand's most popular sides.

LORI DUCKWORTH

PAMELA D. MAXWELL/SHUTTERSTOCK

MEGAN ROSSMAN

Hasty-Bake charcoal grills in an open kitchen, a welcome spectacle for those waiting in line. While fuel sources on most smokers are offset, the firebox on a Hasty-Bake occupies the same space as the meat, which gives the bark a distinct texture. Charcoal, an uncommon fuel at most Oklahoma barbecue restaurants, adds what has become a trademark flavor here.

Clay Norvelle, who lives just four blocks away, has been eating at Burn Co. about once a week since 2014. Dubbed the restaurant's "official unofficial biographer," he's become an honorary member of the team, occasionally tending bar or helping with errands.

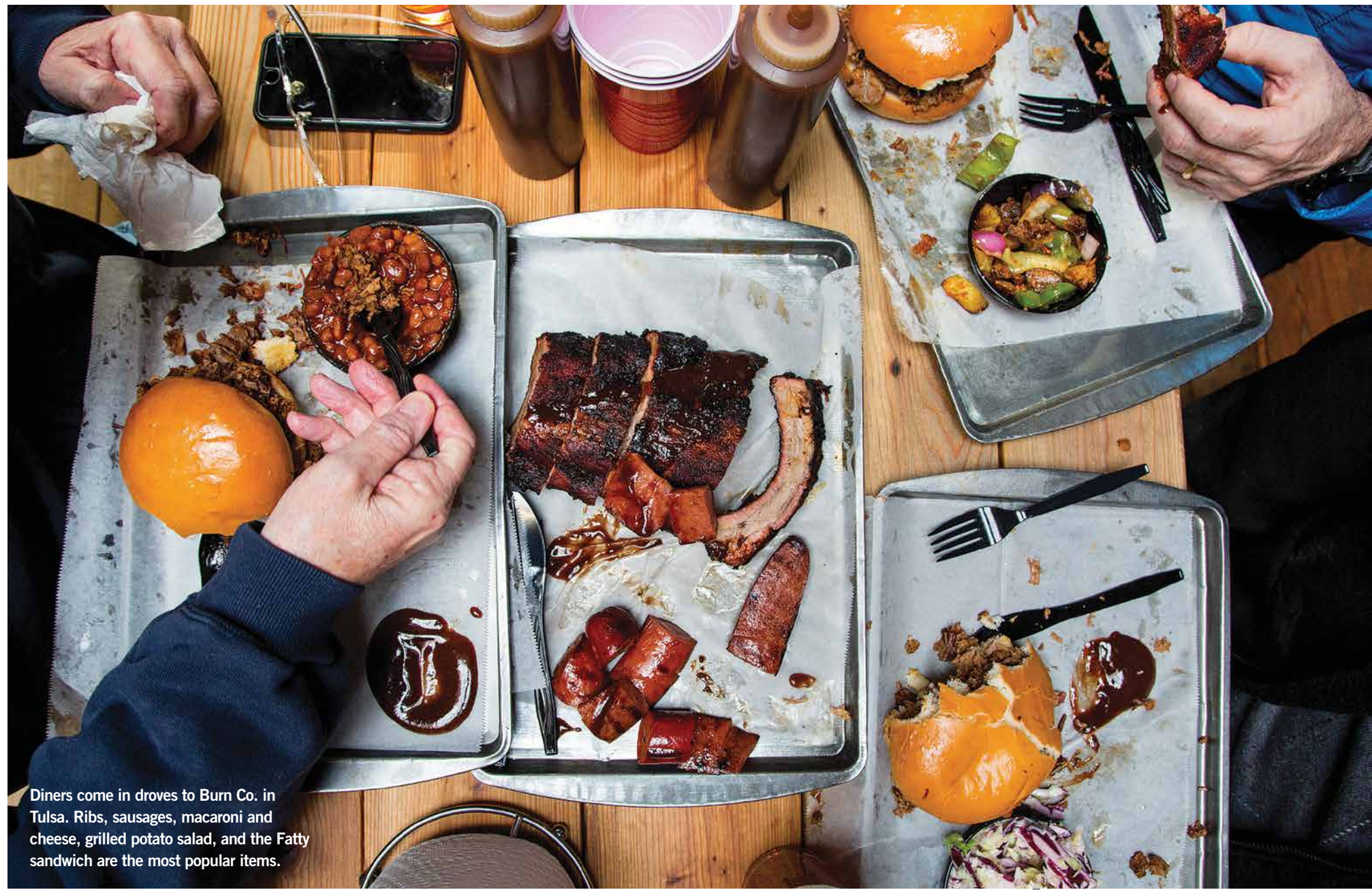
"I can sit there for hours and watch people, and everybody looks really happy to be there," he says. "I've seen how much the guys go through, getting up at almost four in the morning and starting the fires by five or five thirty, and they're doing this all to show the community their craft but also to feed their families. But, really, it's just a cool place to go."



SEVENTY MILES DOWN the turnpike, the Butcher BBQ Stand in Wellston has emerged as another one of the state's coolest barbecue spots. It's operated by second-generation butcher and third-generation barbecuer Levi Bouska.

"My family owned a custom meat processing plant down the road, so I've been throwing meat at grinders since I was old enough to stand on a milk crate," he says. "It's all I know how to do."

On the same lot along Route 66 where his grandparents ran Pioneer Camp BBQ from 1995 until it burned down in 2007, Bouska now operates out of a forty-foot insulated shipping container. Friday through Sunday, under a picnic-style pavilion adorned with string lights, people line up, eager to get their fill. When the



Diners come in droves to Burn Co. in Tulsa. Ribs, sausages, macaroni and cheese, grilled potato salad, and the Fatty sandwich are the most popular items.

weather's good, Bouska and his crew see upwards of 600 people during Saturday peak hours. On a typical weekend day, they churn out 120 slabs of ribs, 35 briskets, 35 burnt ends, 24 pounds of sausage, 24 pounds of hot links, 40 pounds of chicken, and 120 pounds of pulled pork all smoked to hickory-licked heaven. And they usually sell out of everything. Everyone from travelers, truckers, toddlers, and locals line the benches. Around them, piles of meat amassed on metal trays lined with wax paper are swaddled by sides of creamy macaroni and cheese, barbecue beans mixed with pulled pork and apple pie filling, and a sprinkling of Twinkies.

Terry Mason and his wife Terry have driven from their home in McLoud every weekend since Butcher BBQ opened in May 2015. Mason estimates he spends at least forty dollars a week here, and when guests come in from out of town, he makes lunch plans for them.

"I tell them, 'If you all want barbecue, I'll take you where the best is,'" he says. "Levi takes good care of me. It's the best barbecue I've eaten."

Bouska's expertise lies in his upbringing. Son of barbecue world champion David Bouska—whose product line is available at the restaurant and in hundreds of stores around the country—Levi honed his meat skills not only in the butcher shop

but also on his dad's barbecue team at competitions around the country.

"I try to make everything perfect," Levi says. "That's why I only do this three days a week: It's how I felt I could keep up the consistency. If I give you a tough rib, that was my one chance. You don't get second first impressions. I want everything to be how I'd want it to be if I drove this far."



AJOURNEY OFTEN IS part of the quest for good barbecue. Like the carpenter's cup, the unassuming Buffalo's BBQ trailer in the Daylight



“People always talk about Kansas City barbecue and Texas barbecue,” says Buffalo’s BBQ owner Donny Teel. “I look at it as a sandwich. Texas is the bottom side of the bun, and Kansas City is the top side. All the good stuff’s in the middle. That’s us.”

Donuts parking lot in Sperry, about twenty minutes north of downtown Tulsa, is a Holy Grail of sorts.

Monday through Friday, owner Donny Teel is parked here, chopping and slicing between phone orders and the steady stream of customers who wait outside the trailer window for brisket, pulled pork, ribs, turkey, hot links, and bologna—or, as Teel calls it, “Oklahoma Tenderloin”—and prime rib on Wednesdays. Although he serves all the typical barbecue meats, he says pork and ribs are what he does best. Crisp, smoky bark holds a tender center that tears gently from the bone. These ribs are a work of art Teel has been perfecting for twenty-two years.

“You don’t want stuff falling off the bone,” he says. “Anyone can cook stuff falling off the bone. All you’ve got to do is overcook it. A perfect rib is when you pick up clean bites at the bone, but the bone stays in the rib.”

A cofounder of the Oklahoma Barbecue Society, Teel boasts a long list of national accolades, including winning the 2004 American Royal World Series of Barbecue—commonly known as the world’s largest barbe-

cue—and the 2005 Jack Daniels BBQ World Champion title. Masters of ‘cue don’t even need to mention his name to other Oklahoma barbecuers. When talk turns to Oklahoma greats, others bring him up without prompting.

“If there’s an award to win, he’s won it,” says Levi Bouska. “Buffalo’s BBQ is the best I’ve ever had.”



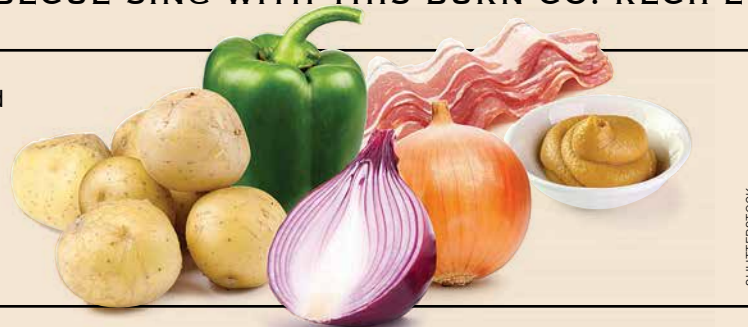
ON THE OTHER side of the state, it’s cold and gray in Lawton, but John & Cook’s Real Pit BBQ is warm, cozy, and permeated by the smoky-sweet aroma of the pit in back. It’s well after noon, but a continuous trickle of late lunchers keeps the staff occupied in friendly conversation.

A waiter emerges from the kitchen with plates bearing bright red hot links and mounds of juicy pulled pork. John & Cook’s three sauces, if even necessary, are tangy departures from the norm. And then there are the beans. Cooked in a spicy, mustard-based sauce, these legumes are a serious contender for the best side in Oklahoma.

GRILLED POTATO SALAD

MAKE YOUR NEXT BARBECUE SING WITH THIS BURN CO. RECIPE

- 3 lb. Yukon baby gold potatoes, quartered
- 2 green peppers, chopped
- 1 yellow onion, chopped
- 1 red onion, chopped
- 2 lb. bacon, cut in pieces
- ¼ cup spicy mustard



- > Cook bacon in foil pan over indirect heat.
- > Toss potatoes in olive oil and salt to coat. Grill potatoes using grill grates, 45 minutes to an hour, and set aside.
- > Toss onions and peppers in olive oil and salt to coat, then grill them for 15 to 20 minutes.
- > Mix mustard, onions, peppers, bacon, and potatoes. Add salt and pepper to taste.



Giant portions of food are the name of the game at Smokin’ Joe’s Rib Ranch in Davis. Fans farther west can check out the second location now open in Rush Springs.



Debra Ivory co-owns George's Happy Hog Bar-B-Q in Oklahoma City.

Sweet tea refills come unprompted and with a smile. It's a combination of good food and attentive service that's kept the city's oldest black-owned business running since 1930, when John Weathers started it in his backyard. A few years later, Weathers teamed up with Lamar Cook, and since 2005, Cook's grandson Lonzo Gaines has been running things. He's worked in the business since he was sixteen, and it's still the same John & Cook's barbecue Lawtonites have grown up loving.

"I have a lot of old customers," says Gaines. "They were raised up on this food. They brought their kids, and then they brought their grandkids. You take care of your customers, and they'll take care of you. That's our bottom line."

Gaines talks at length about his customers, but when it comes to cooking specifics, like many pitmasters, his methods and recipes are secret.

"You have to know your fire, and you have to know your woods," he says. "There are a lot of different techniques, and I don't disclose those."

He does acknowledge the brick pit oven behind the kitchen is responsible for some of the magic. "If it's not brick, it's not a pit," is the restaurant's unofficial slogan. While many places use barrel pits for their 'cue, Gaines employs this forty-year-old, well-seasoned tool to give his meat a hit of extra flavor. Between Gaines' own culinary sorcery and his oven's, it's a safe bet John & Cook's will be casting spells on Lawton residents well into the future.



DEBRA IVORY, WHO'S owned George's Happy Hog Bar-B-Q in Oklahoma City with her son Stephen since 2012, doesn't know why the restaurant's founder George Thompson named the restaurant what

he did, but that doesn't change one fact about this place: "We got a lot of pig."

When it began in 2003, George's was a carry-out restaurant at a filling station at Northeast Tenth Street and Martin Luther King Avenue, but its popularity led Thompson to open the larger current location south of the State Capitol. He died three years later, but his rubs and basic sauce recipe live on in harmony with Debra's own creations.

"I like my meat flavored to the bone, like George, and I use pecan, the same wood he used," Debra says. "We smoke that brisket all night, and we smoke the other meats all day long. There's something going all day."

Everything else, however, is done Debra's way. Savory collard greens, beans flecked with brisket, macaroni and cheese, potato salad, and a wide variety of desserts like cobblers, cakes, and cookies are satisfying accompaniments to the main course. Politicians intermingle with blue-collar workers over populist fare like rib ends and bologna—and wings on Tuesday and Wednesday—while the staff churns out the goods lunch through dinner, giving the place a feeling of home.

"We call people by their names, and we expect them to come, and they do," Debra says. "I always wanted a place where you felt at home and you felt the love in the food."

That love is what it comes down to. With so many variables in technique and fiercely revered institutions to boot—Bad Brad's, Mac's, Elmer's, Albert G's, Wild Horse, Van's, Bob's, Leo's, Jigg's, Roy's, and Ken's are just a few on a seemingly unending list of Oklahoma favorites—attempts to crown a winner defy barbecue's democratic backbone. True to this egalitarian appeal, the freedom to choose a favorite place remains among Okies' inalienable rights, and the choice of how to satisfy this hunger is and always will be in the hands of the people. ■



"We don't have all the flash and dash of some of the commercial restaurants," says John & Cook's Real Pit BBQ owner Lonzo Gaines. "This is a family-owned business, and you're going to get what you pay for."

Smokin' Joe's Rib Ranch is open Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. and Friday and Saturday, 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. 3165 Jollyville Road in Davis, (580) 369-2818. Burn Co. is open Tuesday through Saturday, 10:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. or until they sell out. 1738 South Boston Avenue in Tulsa, (918) 574-2777 or burnbbq.com. The Butcher BBQ Stand is open Friday and Saturday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. in winter and 8 p.m. in summer and Sunday, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. 3402 West State Highway 66 in Wellston, (405) 240-3437 or butcherbbqstand.com. Buffalo's BBQ is open Monday through Friday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. or until they sell out. 201 North Highway 11 in Sperry, (918) 288-6200 or buffalosbbq.com. John & Cook's Real Pit BBQ is open Monday through Saturday, 10:30 a.m. to 8 p.m. 1310 Southwest Twenty-first Street in Lawton, (580) 248-0036 or johnandcooksrealpitbbq.com. George's Happy Hog Bar-B-Q is open Monday through Saturday, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. 712 Culbertson Drive in Oklahoma City, (405) 525-8111.

BY MEGAN ROSSMAN

The Gaming of CATS

CATS HOLD A SINGULAR PLACE IN THE HEARTS OF THE HUMANS WHO CARE FOR THEM. WITHIN THE WORLD OF FELINE LOVE IS A MICROCOSM OF CAT OWNERS WHO BREED, GROOM, AND SHOW CATS ON THE COMPETITIVE CIRCUIT.

THE WORLD'S RELATIONSHIP with cats is storied and symbiotic. Their vermin-hunting skills first earned them a place of honor before Egyptians elevated them to god status. Thousands of years later, religious hysteria demonized them in certain parts of the world for a time before they found themselves once again welcomed into homes and laps. And while dogs may be man's best friend, cats dominate humankind's virtual heart. Since the first cat video popped up on YouTube in 2005—uploaded by one of the site's founders—at least 2 million more have garnered billions of views. Countless cat photographs can be found online at any given time, and cat food company Friskies estimated that 15 percent of all web traffic is cat-related. In spite of—or perhaps because of—their aloof, stubborn demeanors, these furry little predators are beloved by many.

Enthusiasm for cats, of course, extends beyond the internet, and there's no better place to see it in its most concentrated form than at cat shows. Most people are familiar with the concept of dog shows. The feline equivalent isn't as well-known, but it spans more than a century. The first national American cat show took place at Madison Square Garden in 1895, where a brown tabby Maine coon named Cosey was awarded Best in Show and an engraved silver collar.

Stompdancer, an odd-eyed exotic owned by Janis Walkingstick, strikes a pose at a Cat Fanciers' Association show.

CHAMAN PHOTOGRAPHY



INSTEAD OF WATCHING all those cat videos online, take a big breath and walk through a cat show,” says Janis Walkingstick. “We get a lot of people who come for the first time and love it.”

Walkingstick is the secretary and past show manager for the Oklahoma City Cat Club, which hosts its annual competition the first weekend in April. A self-described “cattery brat,” she grew up in the world of the feline elite. Her mother bred the first exotic shorthair to win grand champion in the world at a Cat Fanciers’ Association show in 1971. A longtime teacher and former news anchor, Walkingstick has been a CFA-registered breeder of American shorthairs and exotics—which are like shorthaired Persians—since 1971.

Founded in 1906, CFA is the oldest and largest existing cat registry, licensing hundreds of competitions annually. And while it’s more of a newbie on the scene, The International Cat Association (TICA), which began in 1979, is Earth’s other reigning cat entity. Along with outreach and breeder assistance programs, both organizations sanction cat clubs grouped by region. In Oklahoma, there is one CFA club—the Oklahoma City Cat Club—and three TICA clubs in Oklahoma City and Muskogee. These individual groups produce the shows.

It’s hard for a first-timer to know what to expect at one of these gatherings—other than a lot of cats. Upon entering the exhibition hall at the TICA ThunderKatz club show, visitors come into the

benching area, with rows of tables topped with carriers and crates draped in towels, blankets, and décor. Booming voices direct competitors to various rings over a loudspeaker. People zip down the aisles, transporting Persians, Ragdolls, Sphynxes, Maine coons, and all imaginable incarnations of cat to six judging rings along the sides of the room. The flawlessly groomed participants, indifferent to the nervous human excitement in their midst, loll in their ringside cages, sleeping, stretching, and staring their contemptuous stares. One by one, they’re lifted to a table in the center of the ring, where judges shake tasseled wands at them. They respond in true cat fashion with agile pounces and swats. After each contestant’s been appraised, it’s moved back to its cage to await a ranking.



Left, Dennis Chamness and his Devon rex Simba Roo. Right, the Lykoi—also known as the werewolf cat—is a newer breed recognized by The International Cat Association.

LORI DUCKWORTH

LORI DUCKWORTH



A Persian tolerates the moment in the ring at the ThunderKatz show in March.

Judging groups range from wide—like breed—to very specific. Walkingstick has a cat that was deemed this year's best copper-eyed white exotic globally. Some cats are pedigreed; some are mutts. Some are kittens; some are adults. For every win a cat gets, it earns points that count toward cumulative end-of-year titles. The points and judging systems can be difficult for an outsider to follow, but fortunately, the most important aspect of attending a show as a spectator is simple: You get to look at cool cats.

"It's a selective audience, just like dogs or Arabian horses," says Reneé Spahr of Chandler. "You have this selective love. It's a crazy cat woman's fantasy. You come here and see every kind of cat there is."



SPAHR SHOWS LYKOIS, also known as werewolf cats for the sparse gray hair that creates their chupacabra-like appearance. The breed is recognized by TICA but not CFA, and there are reportedly fewer than three hundred Lykois in the world. Spahr owns six.

Another unconventional TICA specimen is the Savannah, which originated in Ponca City in the late 1980s, when Joyce Sproufe bred an African serval with a domestic cat. The Savannah is the organization's tallest and most wild-looking cat.

Deborah-Ann Milette has owned Savannahs for twelve years. She moved to Oklahoma from Rhode Island about

LORI DUCKWORTH

LORI DUCKWORTH



Marty Young's Magical Storm—whom she calls Magic—was named The International Cat Association's Best Abyssinian of the Year for 2016-2017.



nine years ago, because certain generations of the breed are illegal there and in a number of other states.

“My mother said, ‘You’re moving there for cats?’ And I said, ‘You’re not going to be around much longer, so yeah,’” Milette says with a laugh.

Next to her, a third-generation Savannah named Peanut is sprawled serenely across the benching table. He’s not a show cat, but Milette, a disabled Vietnam veteran, had him registered as an emotional support animal, so he goes wherever she goes, often on a leash. Her other Savannah—Mommas Charmer—is eleven years old and stands seventeen-and-three-quarter inches at the shoulder.

Recognized now by both the CFA and TICA, the Bengal is another young breed with wild lineage. These cats are descended from domestic breedings with Asian leopards, and many groups advocate keeping them indoors, as they’re often mistaken for wildlife.

“I heard a story of a woman who was missing hers, and one day she went to her neighbor’s house to see he had it mounted and stuffed,” says Sharron Henderson, whose own Bengal, Mocha Fudge Ripple, is the number-one TICA-ranked Bengal in the world. “I hope it’s an urban legend, but I don’t think it is.”

Along with more rare types, there are plenty of classic and better-known breeds to see in all their surprising variety and, sometimes, attire.

Simba Roo is a grumpy-faced but sedate Devon rex who frequently dons a tie. His owners, Dennis and Dolly Chamness, are breeders from Colorado who travel for TICA events several times a year.



LORI DUCKWORTH

CHAMAN PHOTOGRAPHY



LORI DUCKWORTH



LORI DUCKWORTH



LORI DUCKWORTH

Above, Sharron Henderson holds her Bengal, Mocha Fudge Ripple. Left, clockwise from top, Janis Walkingstick’s silver tabby American shorthair Salute to Crown E—also known as Sal—recently was named the twentieth best cat in the CFA’s Gulf Shore region. Texas breeder Mistelle Stevenson shows off a rare male calico kitten. Cats patiently await their judgement at the ThunderKatz show. The Sphynx is a popular hairless breed.



The atmosphere is busy but friendly at The International Cat Association shows.

LORI DUCKWORTH

“He’s in his cat tuxedo. He goes everywhere with us, but we can’t show him, because he bit a judge,” says Dennis, who cradles the curly-coated cat in his arms. “If we leave him at home, he won’t eat or drink.”



CAT SHOWS ARE good places to meet breeders, who come to show off their broods. But cats like these don’t come cheap, and prices range considerably. Savannahs, Bengals, and Persians are the most high-end breeds, often fetching anywhere from a thousand to tens of thousands of dollars. Other breeds generally run a few hundred to a thousand. Along with pricey pets, TICA and CFA shows usually feature animals from local adoption organizations.

“The first objective listed on the CFA constitution is to promote the welfare of all cats,” says Walkingstick. “We care about all cats, not just pedigreed cats.”

Mommas Charmer is a Savannah owned by Deborah-Ann Milette of Shawnee. The breed descends from domestic cats mated with servals.

LORI DUCKWORTH

Both groups share that ethos, which is evident in the household pet divisions that allow any healthy spayed or neutered feline to compete—pedigrees be damned. Personality, unusual markings, and cuteness win the points here, since breed standards are a non-issue. Many people who go on to breed and show pedigreed cats get their start in the household division.

In 2000, ThunderKatz entry clerk and former show manager Marty Young took home a particularly adorable kitten she found stranded on Route 66 in her hometown of El Reno. A friend was attending a cat show, which Young thought sounded fun, so she gave it a shot. Her cat Bear made eleven out of twelve final rounds, and Marty was hooked. Four years later, she began breeding Abyssinians as a hobby and later switched to Oriental shorthairs and Siamese. Her cat Magical Storm was named TICA’s best Abyssinian of the year for 2016-2017.

“It’s fun, but it’s a lot of stress,” says Young of her cat show duties. “I’m dead for three days afterward, but I’ve made so many wonderful friends all over the world. ‘Felines, fun, and friendship’ is the TICA motto.”



AS WITH ANY competitive event, there’s a frantic energy at cat shows. But along with the tension comes the comfortable rapport of people who share the same niche passion. There’s no Christopher Guest *Best in Show*-level interpersonal drama on display at these events. Everyone just seems happy to be in the midst of a hundred-plus cats and their doting human companions.

For their part, the cats—eternally unimpressed by the adoration and friendships they inspire—continue to allow this ritual. Whether they are starring in internet videos, presiding in show rings, or delivering something dead to the doorstep, cats continue to be prime pet motivators of human happiness—whether they care or not. ■

The Red River Rascals TICA club’s Kitty Kat Round Up at the OK Corral is October 14-15 at the Biltmore Hotel in Oklahoma City, 401 South Meridian Avenue, (405) 947-7861. redriverrascals.com. ThunderKatz, thunderkatz.org. The Cat Fanciers’ Association, cfa.org. The International Cat Association, tica.org.