



Summer road trips: Follow the Texas Barbecue Trail

By [Jayne Clark](#), USA TODAY

TAYLOR, Texas — In the rolling prairies of central Texas, three topics are likely to get you into a fight: politics, religion and barbecue.

But even opposing factions who reach accord on the first two topics might find it tough to agree on a subject that ignites fierce passions in these parts: finding the best Texas-style barbecue.

Which is where the Texas Barbecue Trail comes in.

The trail is a semi-loop that takes in four towns -- Taylor, Elgin, Luling and Lockhart -- within an hour's drive northeast and south of Austin. Purists generally agree that the state's best barbecue comes from central Texas, an area settled in the 19th century by German, Czech and Polish immigrants who brought their Old Country meat-smoking and sausage-making traditions with them.

Admittedly, the barbecue trail is a concoction of the local chambers of commerce, designed to drive traffic to towns that don't rate mention in most tourist guides. But that's the brilliance of this route.

Two-lane roads with generous 65 mph speed limits cut through rural landscapes with vistas big enough to take in unlikely combinations -- a dance hall, a cow pasture and a graveyard, for instance -- along with the occasional only-in-Texas sighting, such as the Penning for Jesus Cowboy Church.

The small towns have no overt tourist come-ons. They were industrious burghs, spawned by the railroads, oil fields and cotton trade. For the most part, their downtowns are picturesque and historic but sleepy. Their broad main streets, wide enough for front-end parking, are lined with stately 19th- and early 20th-century buildings. They're photogenic. Elgin (the Sausage Capital of Texas) was a locale for *What's Eating Gilbert Grape*, *The Alamo* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, among other films. The town square in Lockhart (the Barbecue Capital of Texas), with its magnificent limestone courthouse, served as a backdrop in *Waiting for Guffman*.

The towns have small museums and curio and antiques shops to poke around in. But the barbecue joints, most of which boast a multigenerational pedigree, are the true quest on this road trip. And dining while driving is totally acceptable.

A Texas tradition

"In Texas, people aren't opposed to eating barbecue in their car -- or on the hood of their car," says veteran Texas food and travel writer June Naylor. "It smells so good, you'll probably end up pulling over, anyway."

That may be, but it's better to dine in. Most of these restaurants exude atmosphere that only enhances the flavor of the meat. At Louie Mueller Barbecue in Taylor, for instance, virtually nothing has changed in decades. The 1906 building once served as an athletic facility and later a mercantile, but since 1959 has housed the restaurant opened by Wayne Mueller's grandfather, Louie, in 1949. Like many Texas barbecue joints, this one began with a shack behind the founder's grocery store. Lacking adequate refrigeration, smoking the unsold meat at the end of the day was the best way to preserve it.

Today, Louie Mueller's is an institution, receiving a James Beard Foundation America's Classics award in 2006. Customers are treated to a sample of succulent brisket as they stand at the counter perusing the menu. The meat is served swaddled in butcher paper with Texas-style accompaniments of saltines or spongy white bread, pickles and onion slices. The cavernous main room is dim and smoky and decorated with neon beer signs. Old business cards tacked to the walls are as brittle and fragile as moths' wings. And the long-ago blue walls are thick with a tobacco-colored patina, a byproduct of countless cords of post oak used to smoke brisket and other cuts. (They were going to paint it some years back, "but the locals raised a fit," says Mueller. "They don't want anything to change.")

How to sniff out the the best barbecue

How to distinguish a truly great Texas barbecue joint from a so-so one? Steven Raichlen, author of eight barbecue books, including the just-out *Planet Barbecue! 309 Recipes, 60 Countries* (Workman; \$22.95), offers some clues for finding superior 'cue.

Sniff the air. You should smell smoke. Real Texas barbecue uses real wood — preferably post oak — to fire the grill.

It should be busy — often at weird hours, since many Texas joints cook a certain amount and serve until they run out. "Any place that's serving brisket at 8 a.m. is bound to be good," Raichlen says.

No frills are good frills. Some of the most revered establishments began as meat markets run by European butchers who at day's end barbecued the unsold meat to preserve it. As such, they tend not to be in "cute" towns, he says.

In Texas, it's not about the sauce. Sauce, if served at all, is an afterthought. Accompaniments might include raw onion, pickles and a slice of yellow cheese, with saltines or white bread. "If they serve really crappy bread, preferably right out of the bag, you're onto an authentic place," he says.

The meat is served on butcher paper, not on plates. (Though some joints now offer plates in a concession to the tourist trade.) Servers obsessively unwrap and re-wrap the meat between customers. "They're keeping the meat moist and fresh," he says.



At the 300-seat Southside Market & Barbeque in Elgin, the decor tends toward mounted deer specimens.

"Pretty much if my family isn't makin' barbecue, we're huntin' for it," jokes Bryan Bracewell, whose grandfather bought the restaurant in 1968. Southside is renowned for its "hot guts" -- all-beef sausage, so-called because its casings are made from intestines. The place opens at 8 a.m., and it isn't unusual to see locals breakfasting on sausage and saltines, washed down with a Big Red.

Nearby at Meyer's Elgin Smokehouse, a fourth generation of Meyers is still using the recipes brought over from Germany by their great-grandfather. "You can watch the sausage being made here and feel good about it," says Gregg Meyer.



At Smitty's Market in Lockhart, one side of the parking lot is piled high with post oak used to fuel the indoor pits. At noon, customers are lined out the door to place orders in the smoke-blackened back room adjoining the pits, and the narrow dining room with its vintage advertising signs is crowded and noisy.

The cavernous Kreuz Market (585 seats!) down the street employs a similar routine. Customers order and pick up barbecue in the back room, then move into the main dining room to select side dishes. In business since 1900, Kreuz has made some concessions to customer demands. In 1999, upon moving to the current location, the owners added side dishes for the first time. (Though as in most of the other joints, there are no green vegetables, unless you count coleslaw.) One thing that hasn't changed: At Kreuz's, there are no forks (the meat's so tender you don't need one) and no sauce. "As Dad says, we pride ourselves on the meat. That's the flavor we want to come through," says owner Keith Schmidt.

Still, in tradition-bound Texas, "you have to be real careful about changing things," Schmidt adds. "People have been coming here since their grandparents took them."

What makes great barbecue?

Not that things aren't tweaked here and there. Southside Market added plates in 1992 (though purists can still get their 'cue served on butcher paper). Meyer's employs a vacuum tumbler to pull seasoning into the meat. The 78-year-old Black's Barbecue in Lockhart added garlic and jalapeno cheese to its sausage offerings. Some have expanded or changed venues or added catering operations.

Spice rubs and cooking times vary among the practitioners, but their secrets -- or at least the ones they're willing to share -- are a bit more esoteric.

At the Taylor Cafe in Taylor, owner Vencil Mares, who's been manning the pits since 1948, says the key to great brisket is to "trim the fat off -- but not all of it. Smoke it fat side up for about seven hours and don't ever turn it. Wrap it in butcher paper, put it in an ice chest for eight hours and it'll be good and tender and juicy in the morning."

At the City Market in Luling, 40-year pit master Joe Capello attributes the consistency in his barbecue to the fact that the restaurant serves only two types: brisket and pork ribs, plus sausage.

Mueller chalks up the success of his simple salt-and-pepper rubbed brisket to "a lot of love."

"You ask a thousand people the key to great barbecue and you'll get a thousand answers," he adds.

At the end of the Texas Barbecue Trail, you might not be any closer to finding that key, but you'll probably have a favorite joint, which, to listen to the owners, could be any one of the 10 restaurants.

"If everyone didn't claim theirs is the best, we wouldn't be Texans," says Bracewell.