

# Great of the Grate

New Mexico's  
lip-smacking  
barbecue joints  
deliver smoky  
meats and  
sides with a kick.  
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Joe Powdrell carries on his family's tradition of Texas-style BBQ in Albuquerque.

# New Mexicans

have dabbled in barbecue over the centuries, cooking mostly venison, beef, and *cabrito* (goat), in low, slow, and smoldering fashion, but we've never been quite as smitten by the barbecue bug as we have about where to find the best red chile or the most perfectly proportioned breakfast burrito. The Barbecue Belt stops at our eastern boundary. Because we've no specific tradition to uphold, however, we've imported a little of everything ecumenically, whether central Texas beef brisket or Memphis dry pork ribs. Pit masters statewide have perfected their skills with the style or styles that speak to them. Of course, since it is New Mexico, don't be surprised to come across a little extra chile kick in the seasoning spice, the sauces, and even the sides. (For recipes, see "Tasting," p. 60.)

In real barbecue, wood is both the medium and the message. The fuel doubles as the flavoring by generating clouds of smoke to blanket the food over the long, slow cooking process. Oak, mesquite, hickory, pecan, alder, and fruitwoods like apple are common choices, each giving a bit of its own distinction to a dish. You can add smoke flavor to chicken wings if you want, but this cooking style was popularized for large cuts of meat that require long cooking times in order to become tender—things like beef brisket, pork ribs, shoulders, and even whole hogs. It takes real talent to infuse food with the right amount of smoke, to crust the outside while keeping the interior moist and juicy. It also takes commitment to tend a cooker for more hours than most of us sleep. Today's barbecue "pits" can make the process a little easier, with perhaps a gas-fired starter, or electricity to hold a steady temperature; some take advantage of wood pellets or chunks rather than whole logs to generate smoke. But the best pit masters still oversee the process intently, careful to balance concessions to

ease with dedication to flavor.

My personal start in this meaty subject wasn't terribly auspicious. I grew up in the Midwest and spent my formative years thinking that barbecue was something akin to sloppy Joes—beef drowned in some tomatoey sauce. I first had that notion shattered on a teenage trip to the South, where I discovered the classic pulled pork sandwich with vinegar mixed into the meat. It had a light but distinctive smoke



character, unlike anything I had tasted. The next major life-altering experience came when I moved to Texas in the late 1970s, in my early twenties. A boyfriend introduced me to central Texas barbecue, the well-crustured, smoke-saturated brisket served often without a lick of sauce. My passion for the boyfriend faded, but not my passion for this astonishing meat.

Since then, I've sampled, cooked, and written about barbecue for more than half of my life. I've been part of a team that smoked a whole hog at Memphis in May, one of the country's premier barbecue cook-offs. I won a James Beard Foundation Award for *Smoke & Spice*, a cookbook on American barbecue traditions. But my most important credentials might be the scars on my hands from hot grates, and the general agreement among people



From top: Glorious ribs and a convivial atmosphere make Mad Jack's a highlight of Cloudcroft.

Grilling doesn't impart the same smoky flavor or red-tinged bark that smoking lends to meat.



who know me that I'm more likely to smell of Eau de Oak Smoke than of any girlie perfume. Here are my picks for the best barbecue in New Mexico.

## Mad Jack's Mountaintop Barbecue

CLOUDCROFT

Anyone truly serious about barbecue should hightail it down to Cloudcroft, high in the ponderosa pines of the Lincoln National Forest. The only thing that should slow you down is that this wondrous spot isn't open every day. On the tiny village's main drag, the two-story log building—which once housed Mountaintop Mercantile—stands out. Barbecue disciples who want to make sure they can get some of everything arrive before opening time, forming a snaking line out front. Inside, James Jackson (the name-

sake Jack) and his cheerful staff dispense world-class brisket, beef ribs, sausage, and a killer green-chile-laced beef sandwich called Chile the Kid.

I first heard about Mad Jack's from Daniel Vaughn, the barbecue editor for *Texas Monthly* magazine. Daniel is the only "barbecue editor" that I know of in the entire world, so I paid attention. He hadn't yet sampled the barbecue here, but he knew of it, since Jack had started his barbecue career with a trailer in Lockhart, Texas. Jack's friends had given him the Mad moniker back there. Opening a barbecue joint in Lockhart is akin to opening a green chile restaurant in Hatch: You have to be a little crazy, and you'd better know what you're doing. Wow, does he.

Jack didn't smoke his first brisket until 2012, but he's made up for lost time. He was coached by the likes of barbecue gods

Aaron Franklin, in Austin, and Roy Perez at Kreutz's, in Lockhart. He also claims he picked up some of his cooking ideas from that book I wrote back in the 1990s, *Smoke & Spice*. To my surprise, he produced his grease-stained copy to prove it. After his start in Lockhart, he decided he needed a bigger venue and that Cloudcroft, his favorite vacation destination, was a good spot to set up his next incarnation.

Jack commissioned the legendary Sunny Moberg, of Moberg Smokers, to fabricate his barbecue pit, and he brings in post oak for its flavor and long burn time. Key to his barbecue success is a basic salt-and-pepper rub on quality all-natural beef brisket and ribs, the hallmark meats of central Texas. Initially, Jack lived upstairs so that he could come down and check on the barbecue smoldering away all night long. He eventually trained a "night guy" and a "morning guy" who can be trusted with the process. A full overnight's worth of slow cooking yields some of the best beef barbecue and link sausage I've had the kick-in-the-pants pleasure to enjoy (find them on Facebook).

## Mr. Powdrell's BBQ House

ALBUQUERQUE

Go for the saucy pork, save room for the ethereal pie. Albuquerque's original barbecue spot is a fine example of hickory-smoked, sauce-slathered, East Texas African American meat prep, accompanied by classic Southern sides like fried okra, bacony collard greens, and black-eyed peas. Pete Powdrell started it all some 50 years ago with his grandfather's sauce recipe, a well-balanced blend of tomato, molasses, and vinegar tang. He developed a knack for hickory-smoking pork ribs and other cuts of pork, chicken, legendary turkey legs, and more. Pete's wife, Catherine, perfected the cinnamon-scented sweet potato pie and fruit cobblers. Still one of Albuquerque's few black-owned businesses, Mr. Powdrell's is also likely the oldest African American-owned restaurant in the state. The genial children and grandchildren of Pete and Catherine carry on the legacy today. I'm partial to the homey feeling of the original



A family-picnic vibe and killer crispy pork-belly sandwich draw BBQ lovers to the Encino Firehouse.

brick house on Fourth Street, but there's a newer east-side location operated by family members ([mrpowdrellsbbq.com](http://mrpowdrellsbbq.com)).

## Whole Hog Café

ALBUQUERQUE AND SANTA FE

An offshoot of an award-winning Southern barbecue team, Whole Hog specializes in Memphis-style barbecue, most notably pork smoked over pecan wood. The meats are dry-rubbed, and, while they're infused fully with smoke, it's a lighter touch than you find in most Texas-style barbecue. Despite the name, the crews here are smoking baby back ribs and pork shoulder cuts for pulled pork, as well as beef and more. Part of the fun at Whole Hog is sitting down with the half-dozen table sauces in varied styles, from Memphis and beyond, and dunking or drizzling tender meat with one or more of these top-notch elixirs. The potato salad's so special here that I typically dive into it even before going whole hog. Opt for a starter of barbecue-topped nachos, if you're sharing a meal ([wholehogcafenm.com](http://wholehogcafenm.com)).

## The Ranch House

SANTA FE

Owner Josh Baum came out of the fine-dining tradition, having worked most notably with Martín Rios, a repeat James Beard Award finalist. But Baum opted for a more casual place when he went out on his own some years ago and has made the Ranch House, planted among the sea of chains on Santa Fe's south side, one of the city's most popular independent restaurants. The core of the menu is some fine barbecue, particularly the beef brisket, pork ribs, and smoked chicken flautas, which I find especially hard to resist. Don't miss the green chile queso and chips to start, and have some of the green chile coleslaw on a sandwich or as a side. If you want to try something over-the-top, Josh constructs a burger with green chile, cheddar, bacon, his smoky-sweet sauce, and a tangle of pulled pork and slaw, all between the bun. See if you can save room for the banana bread pudding ([theranchhousesantafe.com](http://theranchhousesantafe.com)).



## Can't Stop Smokin'

ALAMOGORDO AND RUIDOSO

I smelled smoke before we saw the Ruidoso building. It wasn't the usual barbecue aroma, though. As we pulled up, it became evident that we wouldn't be having brisket or ribs that day. The building itself had burned nearly to the ground, with portions of a couple of toasted walls still standing like sentries. We sat there stunned, but almost instantly a man came from a nearby trailer and greeted us. Part of the Schiavone family of owners, he wanted us to know that they were already making arrangements for catering, and that they would be rebuilding and even incorporating some of those charred surviving

timbers into the new design. Best of all, the branch of Can't Stop Smokin' in Alamogordo was open, and on the way to where we were headed next. See? They really can't stop smokin'. In addition to the expected pork and beef, the chicken is especially flavorful here, and the sides include green beans, corn on the cob, pintos, and mac and cheese, with fruity cobbler to finish ([cantstopsmokinbbq.com](http://cantstopsmokinbbq.com)).

## Hail's Holy Smoked Barbecue

ANGEL FIRE

Though it's right smack in the middle of town, you have to look closely to see the sign for this charming little family-owned joint, tucked behind a gas station and mini-mart. Hail's specializes in central and West Texas-style dry-rubbed beef and other meats—served with barbecue sauce on the side only. That holy smoke blends oak, hickory, mesquite, and apple woods. Desserts are made well, too ([hailsholysmokedbbq.com](http://hailsholysmokedbbq.com)).

## Sugar's

EMBUDO

Among these dining establishments, Sugar's may be the closest in style to the classic barbecue shack. The small white stand looks absolutely spiffy in front of a gorgeous backdrop of peppercorn hills. You can get Texas-style brisket and sausage, which I like best here when rolled into a burrito with green chile. Just to keep you on your toes when you're looking for Sugar's, the sign closest to the winding riverside highway says only ICE CREAM (find them on Facebook).

## The Encino Firehouse

ENCINO

I found out about this place from readers, who voted it Best New Restaurant in our 2017 poll. Encino, down in Torrance County, has a population of 82. The Firehouse is the brainchild of two of those residents, Victor and Tracie Gallegos. Victor serves as the town fire chief, and when the department moved from this 75-year-old structure



The Ranch House in Santa Fe shared the recipe for this green chile coleslaw, (see, *Side Hustle*, p. 60).



to new digs, he and Tracie bought and repurposed the spacious building. It's now a café, general store, and meeting spot for the community and those of us passing through. Victor mans a smoker/grill out back and serves up sandwiches of smoked brisket, pulled pork, crispy glazed pork belly, or—arguably my favorite—bologna. (Keep in mind, though, that this old childhood standard is a menu special, not an everyday item.) If you miss the bologna and can't decide among the other dishes, I suggest trying the Wild Cat Tacos, with a mix of pork and brisket zipped up by both red and green chile ([theencinofirehouse.com](http://theencinofirehouse.com)).

## Sparky's Burgers, Barbeque & Espresso

HATCH

It's hard to miss the ebullient Sparky's as you drive into Hatch. Just look for the collection of fun, larger-than-life figurines decorating the roof and entrance. Many people know Sparky's for its much-

lauded green chile cheeseburger, part of the state Tourism Department's Green Chile Cheeseburger Trail. That burger is fantastic, but barbecue was the first food item that owner/manager/head cook Teako Nunn served when he had something of a pop-up stand at a nearby trailer park. He served me my first pulled pork sandwich some 20 years ago, and I still remember the moment like it was last week. If you only have a chance for one meal here, get that pork sandwich with pineapple coleslaw and a side of corn with local green chile. Be sure to try one of Josie Nunn's espresso drinks, too ([sparkysburgers.com](http://sparkysburgers.com)).

## Smokehouse

RED RIVER

One of the highlights of heading to this barbecue barn is the Enchanted Circle drive to Red River. If you can do it—as I was fortunate enough to—in a vintage convertible, top down, on a cloudless New Mexico day, so much the better. Smokehouse offers Texas-style dry-rubbed meats, like beef briskets cooked for 20 hours by chef Cary Thompson. Thompson mops (or bastes) the meat periodically with a beer-based liquid to add another layer of flavor while keeping the meat juicy. You can get smoked prime rib on weekends and smoked meatloaf every day, along with brisket, ribs, sausage, and more ([smokehouseredrivernm.business.site](http://smokehouseredrivernm.business.site)). **MM**

Contributing writer **Cheryl Alters Jamison** is featured in "Storytellers," p. 8.