

smoked signals

A BARBECUE AFICIONADO ON THE TRAIL OF MISSOURI'S FINEST

THE CAR KNOWS.

I don't know how, but it knows. Somewhere deep in the navigational DNA of my Lexus GS, my car knows barbecue.

I love barbecue. It's not a passive love, not the effete affection I feel for a perfect creamy mound of horseradish mashed potatoes. No. My love of barbecue is another love entirely—a passionate, violent, plan-an-entire-vacation-around-it love. I eat barbecue the way other men play golf: sloppily and obsessively. For me, there's simply nothing else in the world of good eating that comes close to the pungent taste of a saucy bone larded with smoky meat.

From the brontosaurus-size salt-and-pepper beef ribs of Austin, Texas, to the tender baby backs of Ogden, Utah, from South Side Chicago

smokehouses to Carolina dry-rub shacks, I've eaten barbecue in nearly 40 states. And while I celebrate variety, for me there's simply no place on earth where the best elements of regional barbecue blend more beautifully than in Missouri. Don't get me wrong. I appreciate the classic simplicity of east Texas—delicate slices of mesquite-infused meat slapped straight onto a sheet of butcher paper—and I'm willing to converse with those who swear by Memphis. I've had some fine meat there, too. But my money, my heart, and my rather ample stomach will always go for the Show Me State's melting-pot style.

Blessed with nearby stockyards and towering stands of hickory and oak, Missouri was made for barbecue. It's why, when renowned chef Adam Perry Lang decided to bring high-end

barbecue to Manhattan's West Side, one of his menu's centerpieces was St. Louis-style sticky ribs. It's also why I'm here.

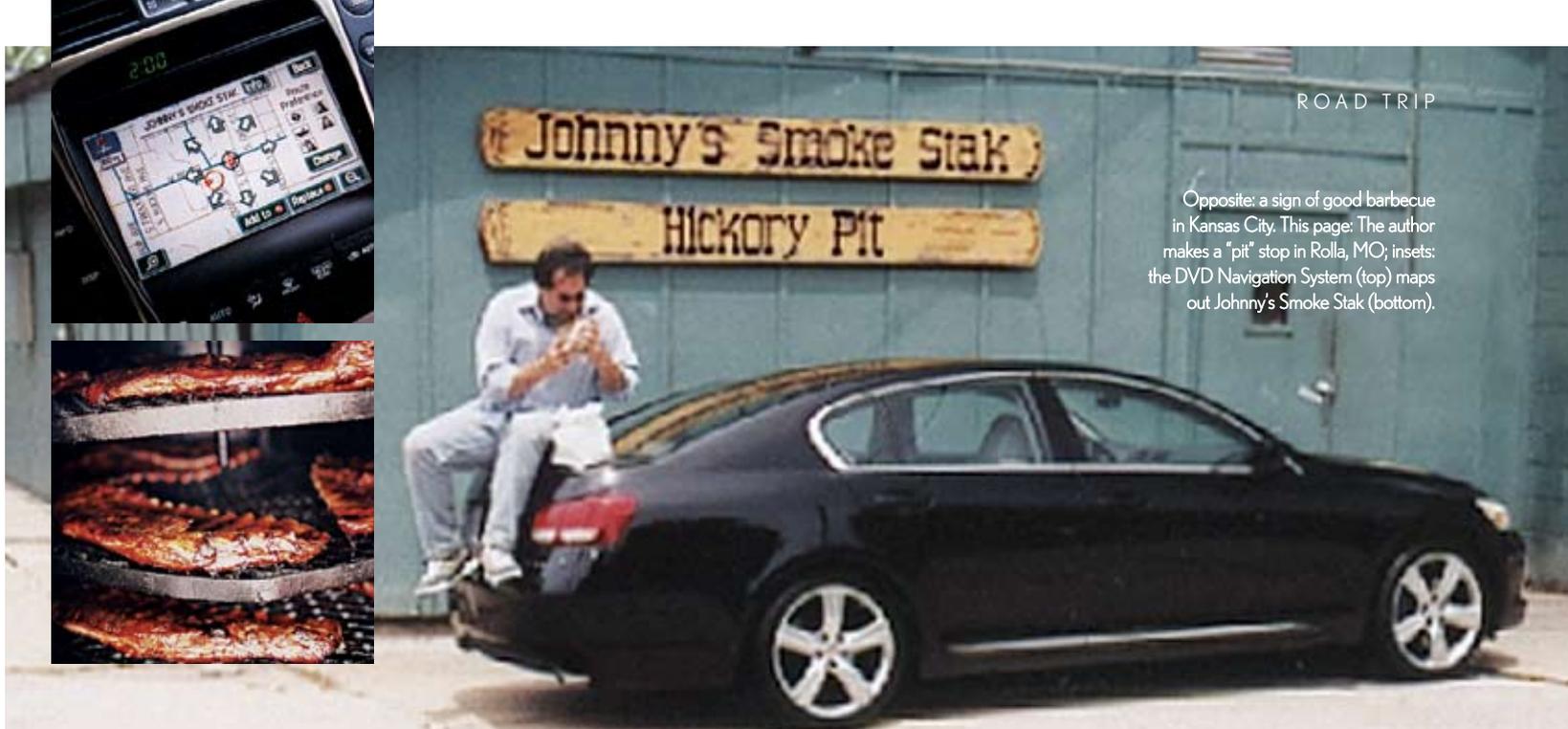
For the next four days, from behind the wheel of a flint-colored rocket outfitted with a barbecue-locating navigation console, I'll jockey a nimble 290-horsepower, 4.3-liter V8 along the mighty Missouri River from St. Louis to Kansas City. I'll stop as often as possible to consume as much smoked meat as my stomach will allow. I'm off, in other words, on the barbecue road trip of a lifetime.

MONDAY

The navigation console winks on—an electronic lapdog, eager to help me fetch. Punching a few spots on the touchscreen, I explain, in

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Opposite: a sign of good barbecue in Kansas City. This page: The author makes a "pit" stop in Rolla, MO; insets: the DVD Navigation System (top) maps out Johnny's Smoke Stak (bottom).

nav-speak, that I'm hungry for barbecue. I accomplish this by tapping my way through a series of menus—a place of interest, a restaurant, a type of cuisine. This being the St. Louis area, I quickly find a number of options, helpfully displayed under the patriotic rubric of "American food."

The restaurant that grabs my eye is Phil's Bar-B-Q, which *Sauce*, St. Louis' alternative newspaper, has named the city's best barbecue for three years running. It's in a different part of town than my hotel, but no matter; I've got a full tank of gas. So I slide the moonroof open and, after some quick sight-seeing, jump onto I-55 south to reach St. Louis' Wilbur Park neighborhood

A rustic-looking shack decorated with bowling trophies, Phil's Bar-B-Q has been in the Polizzi family for three generations. Mary, Phil's daughter, recalls the days when the place was just her father's backyard barbecue. It hasn't evolved too far—Phil's doesn't ship or franchise, or even (unless you're lucky) deliver much. The ribs are wonderful, and the sliced pork shoulder sandwich, served on a long white roll, is superb. Phil's sauce is sweet and tangy without being cloying—no high-fructose corn syrup here.

TUESDAY

Jogging southwest toward Springfield, I-44 runs alongside historic Route 66. And just past Molly's Amish Furniture and Fireworks, near

Gray Summit, MO, the speed limit ticks up to 70, and I can open the car up a little. Wind whips through my hair; the 18-inch wheels and adaptive variable suspension hug the road. I find to my delight that the onboard navigation system has an entry for Johnny's Smoke Stak. It's in Rolla, MO, about 100 miles away. Turning on the voice directions, I let the car guide me to my next stomach-expanding stop.

Heaven at the Smoke Stak begins about four hours after the lazy heat of a hardwood fire starts to carbonize the bony structure that once protected a pig's vital organs. Indirect heat is magical—cooking with the thought of fire rather than with the flame itself. Barbecue is all about time and temperature, and at Johnny's Smoke Stak the fires burn low and slow. The meat comes unsauced. Not that there isn't sauce; it's made in a building right behind the pit. It's just that Johnny's is a sauce-as-you-go kind of place.

Back on the road, I slice to the northwest on Old Highway 63, toward Missouri's capital, Jefferson City—scenic, on the banks of the Missouri River. About 60 miles farther west is Sedalia, the home of rails, trails, and ragtime. It's also the home of Dickie Doo Bar-B-Que.

WEDNESDAY

It's another perfect day, and I'm closing in on the meat mecca of Missouri: Kansas City. The city is so full of great barbecue that it seems unfair to the rest of the country. Scattered

RESOURCES

ON THE HIGHWAY:

If you have a big appetite and a fast car, here are the essential stops in the search for great Missouri barbecue. Starting in St. Louis, hit Phil's (9205 Gravois Rd.; 314-631-7725), a modest shack that makes what's been proclaimed the city's best barbecue for three years running. Super Smokers (601 Stockell Dr.; 636-938-9742) is also known for tasty ribs. Then head southwest on Interstate 44 for about 100 miles to Rolla, where Johnny's Smoke Stak awaits (201 Hwy. 72 W.; 573-364-4838). From Rolla, angle northwest on Old Highway 63 for about 70 miles toward Jefferson City, then shoot 60 miles west on Route 50 to Dickie Doo's in Sedalia (4860 S. Limit Ave.; 660-827-3344). Finally, jog north to join I-70 West for a 75-mile drive to barbecue land's capital: Kansas City. Spend at least two days of eating here. It's worth it, if only to sample Arthur Bryant's (1727 Brooklyn Ave.; 816-231-1123) or Gates (1221 Brooklyn Ave.; 816-483-3880). Other K.C. knockouts: LC's (5800 Blue Pkwy.; 816-923-4484) and Fiorella's Jack Stack (101 W. 22nd St.; 816-472-7427).

AT HOME:

Can't get away? Delectable Missouri barbecue sauces are available for delivery. Order Bryant's phenomenal sauce at www.arthurbryantsbbq.com or 816-231-1123. Gates also offers an array of sauces and rubs (www.gatesbbq.com; 816-923-0900). LC's is a local spot, but even *its* outstanding sauce can be had, thanks to www.americasbestbbq.com or 800-814-6815. Need a meal? The king of mail-order ribs, Fiorella's, will deliver tasty beef and pork ribs, homemade sausages, and genuine burnt ends (www.jackstackbbq.com; 877-419-7427).

LEXUS GS 430 HIGHLIGHTS

ENGINE:
4.3-liter V8

HORSEPOWER:
290 hp at 5,600 rpm

TRANSMISSION:
Six-speed sequential-shift automatic

STANDARD FEATURES:
18-inch alloy wheels
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Vehicle Dynamics Integrated Management (VDIM)
10-way power driver and front passenger seats
Power-tilt steering wheel
Moonroof

OPTIONAL FEATURES:
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Lexus Link
Mark Levinson® Premium Audio System
Voice-activated DVD Navigation System
XM® Satellite Radio capability
Dynamic Radar Cruise Control
Pre-Collision System
Intuitive Parking Assist

MORE INFORMATION:
www.lexus.com/models/GS/



Clockwise from top left: the "president's choice" platter from Gates Bar-B-Q; sharing a rib-tickler in Kansas City; the Lexus GS takes a riverside break in East St. Louis.

around the city are pits so renowned that even well-traveled aficionados lapse into a cholesterol reverie at their mention. Twenty-five miles outside the city, I set the nav system to guide me to what, in 1974, Calvin Trillin famously described as "the single best restaurant in the world": Arthur Bryant's.

Timmy Brown shyly admits that he may have the best job in barbecue. Timmy's been the pit master at Bryant's for 23 years, tending the celebrated blaze of hickory and oak. Bryant's smoker—one of the most sacred places in American culinary architecture—is a brick zigurat heated to 225 degrees. Inside it a brisket can spend more than 12 hours, a rack of pork ribs just over half that. Knowing exactly how long—that's the pit master's genius.

Less than a half mile from Bryant's is the other place most often mentioned in the same reverent breath: Gates Bar-B-Q. Slightly more upscale, and featuring a "president's choice" that can handily serve seven or eight people, Gates is a vinegary yin to Bryant's brown-sugar yang. Ask a random Missourian on a random street in Kansas City where they fall on the Gates-Bryant's divide and you're likely to get a firm opinion wrapped in a knowing disquisition on the nature and history of barbecue.

THURSDAY

The radio is blasting as I track through traffic, trying hard not to speed. At lunchtime, you're lucky to get a parking spot at LC's Bar-B-Q, with good reason. LC's ribs rival Bryant's and are among the best I've ever had—pulled straight out of the enormous smoker that dominates the small room where the food is served.

LC, a large, animated man with a broad, expressive face, designed the smoker himself and had it built to order by a local mason. It's often fired by wood that he brings back from his lake house in central Missouri. What it doesn't have is the rotating racks of Johnny's in Rolla. As a result, LC's pit master uses something that looks like a two-tined pitchfork to shuttle the meats between the hotter and

cooler racks. LC's sauce is fantastic, livelier than Gates', with a slightly sweeter edge, and his ribs ride a delicious line between super-smoked and overdone.

Having stuffed myself at LC's, I check my watch: plenty of time for another stop. Among the new temples of high-end barbecue, few can beat the elegance and sumptuousness of Fiorella's Jack Stack Barbecue. If you want to have a private party in a fancy dining room and still have world-class ribs, Fiorella's in Kansas City's downtown arts district is the clear choice. With mahogany-stained tables and plush leather banquettes reminiscent of an upscale men's club, Fiorella's is the exemplar of the new breed of swank and delicious barbecue. Sitting not far from the huge stone hearth, just across from a long bar featuring a vast selection of fine vodkas, I dig into one of the most delectable treats of the trip: a smoked lamb rib basted with a sweet, delicate glaze.

I'm hardly hungry, but I still have about two hours before I have to head to the airport. With the touch of a button, the nav system leads me back along 18th Street, back to the sanctum sanctorum. And 10 minutes later, standing in front of the exquisite smoker behind the glass of Arthur Bryant's, I order myself a Kansas City specialty called burnt ends. Made from the saltiest, fattiest bits of a brisket, chopped into cubes the size of casino dice and simmered in a pungent sweet sauce, a burnt-ends sandwich from Arthur Bryant's may well be the single finest thing a carnivore can eat. Standing there, smiling at Timmy, savoring for one last time the wafting scent of the fragrant smoke—after 10 barbecue meals in just four sauce-slathered days—and despite the belly above my belt, I murmur my last and perhaps favorite words of the trip: "I'll take that to go." □



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Experience more of the balanced lifestyle seen in our photo essay "Naturally Driven," including additional eco-friendly venues in and around San Francisco. Next, discover more culinary delights inspired by our barbecue-themed road trip "Smoked Signals." Then get more insight on the lives of Roy Park and Lydia Stark in the suspenseful final installment of our original fiction thriller "Black Sapphire Pearl." (And catch up on parts one and two if you missed them.)

You'll also learn more about the all-new V8-powered Lexus IS-F, and get the inside story on the amazing Lexus-powered victory in the Rolex 24 at Daytona.

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