

# THE NEW YORKER

Dept. of Gastronomy

## BY MEAT ALONE

*The best Texas BBQ in the world.*

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*At Snow's, the pit master, Tootsie Tomanetz, prepares her meat hours before the place opens. Photographs by Brian Finke.*

I approached *Texas Monthly's* cover story on “The Top 50 BBQ Joints in Texas” this summer the way a regular reader of *People* might approach that magazine’s annual “Sexiest Man Alive” feature—with the expectation of seeing some familiar names. There was no reason to think that the list’s top tier—the five restaurants judged to be the best in the state—would look much different than it had the last time a survey was published, in 2003. In recent years, Hollywood may have seen some advances in physical training and cosmetic surgery, but barbecue restaurants still tend to retain their lustre much longer than male heartthrobs do. In fact, I’ve heard it argued that, absent some slippage in management, a barbecue restaurant can only get better over time: many Texas barbecue fanatics have a strong belief in the beneficial properties of accumulated grease.

In discussions of Texas barbecue, the equivalent of Matt Damon and George Clooney and Brad Pitt would be establishments like Kreuz Market and Smitty's Market, in Lockhart; City Market, in Luling; and Louie Mueller Barbecue, in Taylor—places that reflect the barbecue tradition that developed during the nineteenth century out of German and Czech meat markets in the Hill Country of central Texas. (In fact, the title of *Texas Monthly's* first article on barbecue—it was published in 1973, shortly after the magazine's founding—was “The World's Best Barbecue Is in Taylor, Texas. Or Is It Lockhart?”) Those restaurants, all of which had been in the top tier in 2003, were indeed there again in this summer's survey. For the first time, though, a No. 1 had been named, and it was not one of the old familiars. “The best barbecue in Texas,” the article said, “is currently being served at Snow's BBQ, in Lexington.”

I had never heard of Snow's. That surprised me. Although I grew up in Kansas City, which has a completely different style of barbecue, I have always kept more or less au courant of Texas barbecue, like a sports fan who is almost monomaniacally obsessed with basketball but glances over at the N.H.L. standings now and then just to see how things are going. Reading that the best barbecue in Texas was at Snow's, in Lexington, I felt like a *People* subscriber who had picked up the “Sexiest Man Alive” issue and discovered that the sexiest man alive was Sheldon Ludnick, an insurance adjuster from Terre Haute, Indiana, with Clooney as the runner-up.

An accompanying story on how a Numero Uno had emerged, from three hundred and forty-one spots visited by the staff, revealed that before work began on the 2008 survey nobody at *Texas Monthly* had heard of Snow's, either. Lexington, a trading town of twelve hundred people in Lee County, is only about fifty miles from Austin, where *Texas Monthly* is published, and Texans think nothing of driving that far for lunch—particularly if the lunch consists of brisket that has been subjected to slow heat since the early hours of the morning. *Texas Monthly* has had a strong posse of barbecue enthusiasts since its early days. Griffin Smith, who wrote the 1973 barbecue article and is now the executive editor of the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, in Little Rock, was known for keeping a map of the state on his wall with pushpins marking barbecue joints he had been to, the way General Patton might have kept a map marked with spots where night patrols had probed the German line. I could imagine the staffers not knowing about a superior barbecue restaurant in East Texas; the Southern style of barbecue served there, often on a bun, has never held much interest for Austin connoisseurs. But their being unaware of a top-tier establishment less than an hour's drive away astonished me.

I know some of the *Texas Monthly* crowd. In fact, I once joined Greg Curtis, the former editor, and Steve Harrigan, a novelist who's had a long association with the magazine, on a pilgrimage to Lockhart, which some barbecue fans visit the way the devout of another sort walk the Camino de Santiago. I know Evan Smith, who was the

editor of the magazine when this latest barbecue survey was published and has since been promoted to a position that might be described as boss of bosses. I couldn't imagine Smith jiggering the results for nefarious purposes—say, telling his staff to declare a totally unknown barbecue place the best in Texas simply as a way of doing what some magazine editors call “juicing up the story.” I took him at his word when, a few months after the list was published, he told me how Snow's had been found. His staff had gone through the letters written after the 2003 survey complaining about the neglect of a superior specialist in pork ribs or the inclusion of a place whose smoked sausage wasn't fit for pets—what Smith, who's from Queens, refers to as “Dear Schmuck letters.”

He did acknowledge that his decision to name a No. 1—rather than just a top tier, as in the previous barbecue surveys—came about partly because everyone was so enthusiastic about Snow's product but partly because its story was so compelling. Smith himself was not in a position to confirm the quality of the product. Being from Queens is not the only handicap he has had to surmount in his rise through the ranks of Texas journalism: he has been a vegetarian for nearly twenty-five years. (The fact that he is able to resist the temptation presented by the aroma of Texas pit barbecue, he has said, is a strong indication that he will never “return to the dark side.”) As a longtime editor, though, he knew a Cinderella story when he saw one. It wasn't just that Snow's had been unknown to a Texas barbecue fancy that is notably mobile. Snow's proprietor, Kerry Bexley, was a former rodeo clown who worked as a blending-facility operator at a coal mine. Snow's pit master, Tootsie Tomanetz, was a woman in her early seventies who worked as the custodian of the middle school in Giddings, Texas—the Lee County seat, eighteen miles to the south. After five years of operating Snow's, both of them still had their day jobs. Also, Snow's was open only on Saturday mornings, from eight until the meat ran out.

My conversation with Evan Smith took place in a Chevrolet Suburban travelling from Austin toward Lexington. I'd been picked up at my hotel at 7:20 A.M. The *Texas Monthly* rankings had attracted large crowds to Snow's, and, even four months later, we weren't taking any chances. Greg Curtis and Steve Harrigan were with Smith in the back seats. Harrigan was one of the people who, having been tipped off between the time the feature was completed and the time the magazine came out, hurried over to Snow's like inside traders in possession of material information not available to the general public. He seemed completely unrepentant. “I took my brother and brother-in-law and son-in-law and nephew,” he said, smiling slyly. Next to me in the front seat, Paul Burka was doing the driving. Greg Curtis once reminded me that “all barbecue experts are self-proclaimed,” but *Texas Monthly* had enough faith in Burka's expertise to send him to Snow's late in the selection process as what Smith calls “the closer.” It was up to Burka to confirm or dismiss the judgment of the staffer whose assigned territory for the survey included Lexington, and of Patricia Sharpe, the editor in charge of the project, and of a

second staffer sent in as a triple-check. Some people at the magazine had predicted that Burka wouldn't like Snow's barbecue simply because it bore Pat Sharpe's imprimatur. "Paul thinks Pat's judgment of restaurants is fancy and white tablecloth and Pat thinks Paul is a philistine," I heard from the back seat. "And they're both right."

When I spoke to Pat Sharpe a couple of days later, she bristled at the accusation that she is a person of elevated taste. "I'll eat barbecue in the rattiest joint there is," she said in her own defense. Burka, on the other hand, seemed unconcerned about being called a philistine. He is a large man with a white mustache and a midsection that reflects a forty-year interest in Texas barbecue. Having grown up in Galveston, which is not a barbecue center, he innocently started eating what he now describes as " 'barbecue' that was one step removed from roast beef" while he was a student at Rice, in Houston; he had his true conversion experience on a trip to Lockhart with Griffin Smith in 1967, when they were both in law school at the University of Texas. Burka, who worked for five years in the Texas state legislature, writes about politics for *Texas Monthly*. Speaking to him as the Suburban rolled toward Lexington, I was reminded of the Austin brought to life in "The Gay Place," Billy Lee Brammer's marvellous 1961 novel about an L.B.J.-like governor called Arthur (Goddam) Fenstermaker. That Austin was essentially a two-company town—the university and the state government—and I always pictured those connected with both companies sharing irreverent observations of the passing scene while consuming a lot of beer in the back of Scholz's beer garden. It is an Austin that is sometimes difficult to discern in a much larger city of slick office buildings and computer-company headquarters and the mother church of Whole Foods, which actually offers barbecue in the meat department of its Austin stores. ("Organic barbecue," Burka muttered, when somebody brought that up.)

The first time Burka went to Lexington to check out Snow's, he arrived just before noon. "It looked like it had never been open," he said. "It was deserted." When he finally got there at a time when meat was still available, he was convinced. In fact, he was rhapsodic, particularly concerning the brisket ("as soft and sweet as cookie dough") and the pork butt. Smith believed that Burka's description of the latter—"the butt was tender and yielding"—was in need of some editing, but, without having to consume any critters personally, he was persuaded by Burka's report. Snow's was to be named the best barbecue in Texas, and Evan Smith never had any doubt about what would happen as soon as that designation was on the newsstands. "I basically said, 'Congratulations and I'm sorry,' " he told me, "because I knew what would happen."

"That brings up the subject of remorse," I said.

"You mean remorse on their part?" Smith asked.

“No, remorse on your part—remorse for having turned the place into an ugly scene.”

“We don’t publish *Best-Kept Secrets Monthly*,” Smith said, as he got out of Burka’s Suburban. He sniffed confidently, presumably to reassure himself that, despite the aroma, he would have no trouble limiting himself to coleslaw and potato salad. Then he marched across the street toward Snow’s BBQ.

Regular consumers of Hill Country style Texas barbecue know what to expect when they walk into an establishment that is said to offer the real article. I had never been to Louie Mueller’s, in Taylor, before this trip, but when Greg Curtis and I went there the day before the Snow’s outing for what we referred to as some warmup barbecue, the place looked familiar. At a Texas barbecue joint, you normally pick up a tray at the counter and order meat from one person and sides from another. The person doling out the meat removes it from the smoker and carves it himself. It is sold by the pound—often brisket and pork ribs and sausage and beef ribs and chicken and, in some places, clod (beef shoulder). The carver serves it on some variety of butcher paper. If, despite having worked with smoke in his eyes for many years, he is of a generous nature, as the carvers at Mueller’s are known to be, he might slice off a piece of a brisket’s darkened outside—what would be called in Kansas City a burnt end—and, before you’ve ordered anything, place it on your tray as a small gesture. (Given the quality of Mueller’s brisket, it is a gesture that can make a traveller feel immensely pleased about being back in Texas.) A couple of slices of packaged white bread are also included. Usually, the only way to have a brisket sandwich in central Texas is to make your own.

A Texas barbecue joint is likely to have neon beer signs on the walls, and those walls are likely to have been darkened by years of smoke. At Mueller’s, a cavernous place in a former school gym, there is a large bulletin board festooned with business cards, and most of the cards by now look like specks of brownish parchment. In a restaurant serving Hill Country barbecue, there may be bottles of sauce on the tables, but the meat does not come out of the pits slathered in sauce. I remember a sign at Kreuz Market announcing that the management provided neither sauce nor salads nor forks. In central Texas, you don’t hear a lot of people talking about the piquancy of a restaurant’s sauce or the tastiness of its beans; discussions are what a scholar of the culture might call meat-driven.

Geographically, Lexington is not in the Hill Country—it’s in ranch land, northeast of Austin—but ethnically it is. Burka told me that a politician from Lee County once said to him, “It’s the Germans against the Czechs, and the Americans are the swing vote.” Snow’s BBQ turned out to have the sort of layout found in a place like Kreuz Market, except in miniature. It’s a small dark-red building that has room for a counter and six tables—with a few more tables outside, near the cast-iron smokers that in Texas are referred to as pits, even if they’re not in the ground. A sign listed what meats were

available, all for \$8.45 a pound: sausage, brisket, pork, pork ribs, and chicken. The sides offered were “Mrs. Patschke’s homemade coleslaw and potato salad,” plus free beans. There were only a couple of people ahead of us in line. Burka stepped up to the counter to order.

“Are there five of you?” the young woman slicing the meat asked, as Burka tried to figure out how many pounds we needed.

“Well,” Burka said, glancing at Evan Smith. “Four, really. One is . . . he has a big meal coming up.”

“You’re ashamed of your friend,” I whispered to Burka. “You’ve abandoned him.”

“I just couldn’t say the V-word,” Burka said. He looked sheepish—not, I would guess, a normal look for him.

I had warned the *Texas Monthly* crowd that if they were looking for confirmation of their ranking by an objective outlander, someone from Kansas City was not likely to provide it. A jazz fan taken to a rock concert might admire the musical technique, but he probably wouldn’t make an ecstatic rush to the stage. As we sat down at one of the outside tables, under a galvanized-tin covering, I told them that they could expect the sort of response that a proud young father I know has received during the past year or so whenever he e-mails me pictures of his firstborn: “A perfectly adequate child.” Still, what Burka had ordered was good enough to make me forget that we were eating a huge meal of barbecue at a time on Saturday morning when most people were starting to wonder what they might rustle up for breakfast once they bestirred themselves. I particularly liked the brisket, although I couldn’t attest that it was as soft and sweet as cookie dough. In Kansas City, it is not customary to eat cookie dough.

Although Snow’s hours may seem odd to a city dweller, they seem normal in Lexington. Saturday is traditionally when farmers and ranchers from the surrounding area come into town, and at twelve-thirty every Saturday there is a cattle auction in yards that are just down the street from Snow’s. From 1976 to 1996, in fact, Tootsie Tomanetz, who is known far and wide in Lee County as Miss Tootsie, served barbecue every Saturday at a meat market that she and her husband ran in Lexington. Miss Tootsie’s husband is half Czech and half German. She was born Norma Frances Otto, German on both sides, and her father liked to say that when she married she went from having a last name that could be spelled backward or forward to having one that couldn’t be spelled at all. Before the Tomanetzes opened their store, Miss Tootsie had put in ten years tending the pits at City Meat Market, in Giddings. In other words, Kerry Bexley, who’s forty-one, could have a

certainty about Miss Tootsie's gift that was based on having eaten her barbecue virtually all his life.

After lunch, if that's what you call a large meal of meat that you finish just before 9 A.M., I had a chat about Snow's origins with its management team. We talked near the pits, so Miss Tootsie could pull off sausage links now and then. "I felt like with her name and barbecue and my personality with people we could make it work," Bexley told me. He's a short, outgoing man whose résumé includes—in addition to rodeo clown—prison guard, auctioneer, real-estate agent, and shopkeeper. He already had the location—a place where he'd run a farm and ranch store in 1992. The name came from a nickname he'd had since before he was born. According to the family story, his brother, then four years old, was asked whether he was hoping for the new baby to be a boy or a girl, and he replied, not unreasonably, that he would prefer a snowman. Kerry (Snowman) Bexley and Miss Tootsie opened Snow's in March of 2003—Bexley had built the pits—and it did well from the start. "For the most part, we cooked two to three hundred pounds of meat," Bexley told me. "We sold out by noon."

In the weeks after the *Texas Monthly* feature was published, Snow's went from serving three hundred pounds of meat every Saturday to serving more than a thousand pounds. At eight in the morning—six or seven hours after Miss Tootsie had arrived to begin tending the pits—there was already a line of customers, some of whom had left home before dawn. Bexley said that one Saturday morning, when there were ninety people waiting outside, a local resident asked permission to gather signatures along the line for a petition, only to return a few minutes later with the information that there wasn't one person there from Lee County. Some locals expressed irritation at being shut out of their own barbecue joint. At times, Bexley and Miss Tootsie felt overwhelmed. There were moments, they say, when they wished that the tasters from *Texas Monthly* had never shown up. Then Bexley added three brisket pits, Miss Tootsie got some help, Snow's for a time quit taking pre-orders by phone except for locals, and the amount of meat prepared every Saturday levelled off to about eight hundred pounds.

Most of the time, Bexley and Miss Tootsie are grateful for the additional business. Not long after the survey appeared, Snow's BBQ started selling T-shirts that had on them not only "Voted #1 BBQ in Texas" but a motto that Bexley's wife had suggested—"Smokin' the good stuff." Looking around for a way to extend the newly famous Snow's brand without sacrificing the quality of the product, Bexley has hit on mail order, and is hoping to have that under way soon. Snow's already has a Web site. Bexley and Miss Tootsie are also pleased by the personal recognition. They've worked hard. Most people in Lee County work hard without anybody's noticing. Whether or not Kerry Bexley and Tootsie Tomanetz ever feel able to give up their day jobs, they have received the sort of pure validation that doesn't come to many people, no matter what their field of endeavor.

“Miss Tootsie gets some recognition now for what she’s actually done all her life,” Bexley said. “She’s now”—he turned to Miss Tootsie—“seventy-four? Excuse me for asking.”

“No, I’m just seventy-three,” Miss Tootsie said, smiling. “You add a year every time.”

“What did you do when you heard that you were No. 1?” I asked.

“When we found out we were No. 1,” Bexley said, “we just set there in each other’s arms and we bawled.” ♦