

BON APPÉTIT

SEPTEMBER 2007

\$3.99

THE
RESTAURANT
ISSUE

THE
MEATBALL
SLIDER
MAKES IT
BIG!
P. 139



America's Top Restaurants

THE PLACE

Price's Chicken Coop
1614 Camden Road, Charlotte, NC;
704-333-9866; priceschickencoop.com

WHY IT'S THE BEST Like most good southern chicken shacks, there's nothing fancy about Price's Chicken Coop. Despite its location in Charlotte's hip South End neighborhood, it's a dingy, takeout-only place in a nondescript brick building with no seats (unless you don't mind sitting on the curb). So why the long lines? The crunchy-on-the-outside, super-juicy-on-the-inside chicken. Each order arrives in a Coop's signature cardboard box, along with coleslaw, tater rounds, hush puppies, and a roll on the side.

WHAT TO ORDER Fried chicken dinner (we recommend the quarter chicken, all dark meat) and a half gallon of sweet tea.

THE PLACE

Blackberry Farm
1471 West Millers Cove Road, Walland, TN;
800-648-4252; blackberryfarm.com

WHY IT'S THE BEST Is authentic southern fried chicken found only in hole-in-the-wall joints where Grandma does all the cooking? We sure thought so—until we discovered the fried chicken at Blackberry Farm, a stunning 4,200-acre Relais & Châteaux property in the Great Smoky Mountains. The chicken is so incredible because it's soaked in buttermilk for 24 hours, then dipped in a sage-spiked batter and deep-fried. Keep in mind that the chicken is only available at lunch—so take it easy at breakfast.

WHAT TO ORDER Cruz Farm buttermilk-brined fried chicken.

RIBS

THE PLACE

Charles Vergos Rendezvous
52 South Second Street, Memphis;
901-523-2746; hogsfly.com

WHY IT'S THE BEST "Not since Adam has a rib been this famous," goes the saying at this Memphis institution. And if you invented the dry-style rib now imitated from California to New York, you can claim anything you want. Charlie Vergos—whose sons and daughter now run the legendary subterranean spot tucked down a back alley—began grilling pork ribs over charcoal instead of smoking them over wood, the method preferred by barbecue purists. That tradition continues, as does the heavy seasoning that gives Rendezvous ribs their distinct red tint and thick crust. Is it real barbecue? Does it really matter when it tastes this good?

WHAT TO ORDER One thing: charcoal-broiled pork ribs.



THE PLACE

17th Street Bar & Grill
32 North 17th Street, Murphysboro, IL;
618-684-3722; 17thstreetbarbecue.com

WHY IT'S THE BEST When Mike Mills bought 17th Street Bar & Grill in 1985, it offered a decent burger and not much else. He decided to add baby back ribs to the menu—and the rest is history. Between 1989 and 1994, those ribs won Mike "The Legend" Mills hundreds of barbecue competitions, including three World Championships at the famous Memphis in May International Festival. Mills sprinkles the ribs with Magic Dust, a proprietary rub made of 17 spices, then cooks them low and slow over applewood or cherrywood for up to seven hours. We hear there are other standouts on the menu—barbecue pork shoulder, smoked hot links—but we can't bring ourselves to stray from those ribs.

WHAT TO ORDER A full rack of the famous baby back ribs with a side of baked beans.

THE PLACE

Jasper's
7161 Bishop Road, Suite G-1, Plano, TX;
469-229-9111; jaspers-restaurant.com

WHY IT'S THE BEST Owner and executive chef Kent Rathbun's restaurant isn't the obvious choice for excellent barbecue, especially in Texas. There are no communal tables, sawdust-covered floors, or exposed cooking pits. Instead you'll find "gourmet backyard cuisine" served in a slick, modern dining room. But don't be fooled by the decor. Rathbun's slow-smoked baby back ribs are as good as any we've ever had. The ribs, served with a creamy baked-potato salad, are rubbed with seasoning, hung for 24 hours, then wood-grilled over hickory and oak until the orange juice and ancho-chile sauce caramelizes. After four hours of slow cooking, they'll make a believer out of any cynic.

WHAT TO ORDER Slow-smoked baby back ribs with baked potato salad. ■