

17th Street Bar & Grill
By Joe Bonwich
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Here's what I did on my summer vacation: I explored new restaurants.

Of most interest to readers of this newspaper, however, was a stop we made on the way home in Murphysboro, Ill., roughly 70 miles along Illinois Route 13 southeast of Eckert's Market in Belleville. (There are many roads to Murphysboro from the St. Louis area, including a more sterile drive along Interstate 64 to the Illinois Route 127 exit for Nashville, Ill., and another rural meandering, down and around on Illinois Route 3, turning east on Illinois 149.)

Following up on e-mail suggestions I received from readers Alan Geis and Sarah Hill (plus several other phone calls), we targeted Murphysboro to sample the offerings of the 17th Street Bar & Grill, the home base for Mike "the Legend" Mills, team leader of Apple City Barbeque, the only three-time Memphis in May world champion of barbecue. Serendipitously, Mills has also just published "Peace, Love and Barbecue: Recipes, Secrets, Tall Tales, and Outright Lies from the Legends of Barbecue" (Rodale, \$19.95), co-written with his daughter, Amy Mills Tunncliffe.

In addition to the original Murphysboro location, Mills also recently opened a location in Marion, Ill., and operates Memphis Championship Barbecue restaurants in Las



Visitors of 17th Street Barbecue sit and eat in dining room, known as the Pig Pen at the restaurant in downtown Murphysboro, Ill. (Anthony Souffle)

Vegas, as well as serving as a food consultant to St. Louis native Danny Meyer for Meyer's Blue Smoke restaurant in New York City. But aside from clippings from Fortune and other major magazines and newspapers scattered among the photos of Saluki basketball teams from nearby Southern Illinois University Carbondale and other sports and barbecue memorabilia, 17th Street retains a distinct air of a small-town Midwestern bar. The front dining room, which also houses the bar portion, is relatively dim, in contrast to a light-filled, light-wood-paneled back

room. And the staff seems to greet everyone through the door with equal hospitality, whether they're regular locals or travelers making a first-time detour in search of the Legend's legendary meats.

We arrived just before 1 p.m. on a Saturday, resulting in a wait of about five minutes as the lunch crowd dwindled. Barbecue specialties include chicken, beef brisket, baby-back pork ribs and chopped pork shoulder, and for a run through all of them, we simply ordered up a \$19.99 Super Sampler platter.

Although any of the four items could justify the hour to hour-and-a-half jaunt from St. Louis, there are few superlatives in the English language worthy of the ribs we were served. I'm of the school that says that "fall off the bone" isn't necessarily a good thing for ribs, indicating too much cooking and a resulting deterioration in both flavor and texture. The meat on the ribs at 17th Street, in contrast, required a gentle

nudge to dislodge it from the bone, but it was also ideal in texture: not as squishy as "fall off the bone," but also not as resistant as ham, and certainly moist without any hint of wateriness. And the flavor! Hints of spices at the edges, and above all a long-lasting but ethereal smokiness, born of the applewood over which it lingered at length in a low-temperature pit.

Fans of the basting- (or perhaps even stewing-) in-sauce style favored by some St. Louis barbecue joints aren't accommodated at 17th Street, which treats its sauce - vinegary, mustardy, with a just-above-background level of fiery spice and an orange-brown color reflective of its minimal amount of tomato influence - as a finish or condiment. The sauce and a jar of Magic Dust, which is used both for the dry rub before cooking and can be added by the diner, are offered on each table, on a tray that also appropriately includes a vertically mounted roll of paper towels.

Although a completely different animal and cut of meat, the beef brisket also illustrated an ideal balance of texture and flavor resulting from the fine art of "low and slow" cooking. And while I'm all for pretty presentation in the proper context, I actually preferred the way 17th Street brought out slices of brisket that were uniformly a bit less than 1/8-inch thick, but random in length. The meat of the chicken seemed to retain less of the smoke flavor from cooking, but this was in fact a benefit, since too much smoke would overwhelm the more neutral (as opposed to beef and pork) flavor of chicken.

Of the four featured meats, my relative least favorite turned out to be the chopped pork, although I certainly wouldn't ever turn it down by itself. At 17th Street, it's cooked a remarkable 18 to 20 hours, but again, the resulting smokiness accents the meat without inundating it. I think my objection to this form of pork as served on the sampler platter was that it cooled much faster than the other meats, the loss of temperature resulting in a corresponding loss of complexity in the flavor of the meat.

Two sides come with each single entree or combination, and we were especially taken with the baked beans, which incorporated lima and kidney to the standard baked-bean mix. We also felt compelled to try a couple of the appetizers and one of the non-barbecue entrees, and while the entree - fried bluegill - was a pleasant surprise for its firm texture and mild flavor, both it and the basic bar-food appetizers should only be considered as an option for those poor souls who for whatever reason can't eat barbecue but have been dragged along on a "'cue lovers" adventure.

And for the barbecue lovers: This is as good as it gets. We have a legend just an hour or so away (an additional half-hour on Sundays, when the Murphysboro location is closed but the Marion location is open). A pilgrimage is in order.