



# Authentic Barbecue in a Spanking-New Setting

A shiny strip shopping center is not usually where I would expect to find good barbecue. I grew up in Georgia eating at barbecue joints with wooden screen doors, big piles of wood out back and enough hickory smoke to put any air-quality device into permanent shock.

I still gravitate to those barbecue places, but I have also learned that the high-tech methods, with stainless-steel smokers in sparkling clean kitchens, can produce good meat.

And that's exactly what you will find at Virginia Barbeque in the Davis Ford Crossing Shopping Center in Manassas. The store is spick-and-span, with a jaunty red-and-black decor accented with a couple of concert posters (Charlie Daniels and the Masters of Bluegrass, including Bill Monroe, at the Kennedy Center in the mid-1980s), a battlefield map of a nearby Civil War engagement and a few photographs.

There are six red-top tables, with surrounding black bentwood-style chairs. The kitchen is all stainless steel. But the barbecue is pure Southern, whether you choose the Virginia, North Carolina or Texas versions.

For you purists out there, yes, I know this is a franchise operation of a small chain based in Ashland, near Richmond. But John Singletary, the owner of the Manassas location — the only one in the Washington area — was turning out barbecue on his own long before opening this franchise. So the man knows something about how it's done well.

Opening a franchise was simply the best way for Singletary, a Desert Storm veteran, to get into business for himself and have a better chance for financial success. The mortality rate for new restaurants is nearly 85 percent in the first year of operation.

Singletary's Virginia Barbeque opened in September and has become the most successful of the six locations (two more have just opened).

The mainstay of Virginia Barbeque is, of course, pulled barbecued pork with a Virginia-style tomato-based sauce rather than the vinegar and red pepper sauce favored in North Carolina. The sauce is slightly sweet, but with a bit of heat, and the pulled pork, which is smoked 12 hours and then pulled by hand, has a good strong smoked taste that doesn't overwhelm the natural sweetness of the meat.

One has the option of having coleslaw added to the sandwich — take it, the slaw is sweet and tangy and adds an extra layer of flavor to the barbecue. The sandwich is served on a large kaiser roll that is too thick and overpowers the meat.

The sandwich can be purchased by itself or as part of a combo that includes a soft drink and two of the dozen side dishes on the menu. The roasted red potato salad is a good choice; roasting brings out the earthy flavor of the potatoes, and it's not clouded by too much mayonnaise or other fixings. My favorite has to be the hush puppies — those little bits of cornbread dough that are deep-fried and deeply addictive. It would be worth stopping by Virginia Barbeque just for those morsels.

Of course, most barbecue isn't eaten in a sit-down restaurant — it's taken home and served to the family, and Virginia Barbeque offers all of its menu items for carryout, in-



PHOTOS BY DAYNA SMITH — THE WASHINGTON POST



cluding a special family pack designed to feed four people.

I gathered several people for a taste test of the Virginia, Texas and North Carolina styles of barbecue, a rack of ribs, potato salad and baked beans, similar to the taste testings I did three summers ago when I sampled barbecue from about 40 places around the region.

My tasters couldn't decide whether they liked the Virginia or the North Carolina style best. The North Carolina pulled pork barbe-

cue, which doesn't look as though it has any sauce on it at all, packs a good vinegary wallop and a piquant aftertaste in the back of the throat from the red pepper.

We all agreed that both styles of meat could use more sauce — an easy option at the restaurant since there are bottles of both sauces on each table.

The Texas beef barbecue, a little stringier and heavier than the North Carolina and Virginia styles, was the least favorite, but that was after seconds all around. The ribs, avail-

**John Singletary turned out barbecue on his own long before he opened his Virginia Barbeque franchise, part of a small, Ashland-based chain. At left, a pulled-pork barbecue sandwich with coleslaw and beans. The restaurant opened in September at a Manassas shopping center.**

able dry (that is, with just the spicy rub to flavor them) or wet (doused in Virginia-style sauce), had a strong smoky taste that was greatly improved with the warm Virginia sauce.

The baked beans, smoky and not too sweet, vanished long before anyone had a chance for seconds.

Virginia Barbeque offers several combo platters for those who want to sample the various styles of meat. Barbecued chicken, fried catfish and chicken fingers are also on the menu, along with several dishes for children.

**Virginia Barbeque**, 9952 Liberia Ave. (in the Davis Ford Crossing Shopping Center), Manassas, 703-369-4227. Hours: 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday through Saturday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Sunday. Barbecue sandwiches, \$4.25 to \$4.50; pulled pork, pulled chicken and beef barbecue, \$8.99 per pint; side dishes, \$4.99 per pint; rack of ribs, \$15.95. Accessible to people with disabilities. [www.virginiabbq.com](http://www.virginiabbq.com).

*If you have a favorite restaurant that you think deserves attention, please contact Nancy Lewis at [lewisn@washpost.com](mailto:lewisn@washpost.com).*