

eats  
virginia barbeque

# Find your 'inner oink' at Virginia Barbeque

By NANCY DEARING ROSSBACHER and STEPHEN W. SYLVIA For THE FREE LANCE-STAR

She: A North Carolina-born friend of mine used to announce her near-daily dosage of barbecue as "embracing her inner oink." A less than elegant turn of phrase, to be sure, but one readily understood by those of us whose vehicles veer off the road and come to a happy halt anywhere there's a sign with those three letters so dear to native Southerners and transplanted converts: barbecue.

He: "Barbecue" usually conjures an image of a rumpled, beefy fellow with a stained apron, minding a smoky grill, tongs in one hand and Budweiser in the other.

Virginia Barbeque entrepreneur Rick Ivey undoes that preconception. Clad in casual but well-pressed clothing, he draws from a quarter-century of experience as an executive chef. He's also a franchise businessman.

The first location opened in Ashland in 2000, and there are now Virginia Barbeques in Ashland, Fredericksburg, and Culpeper and Stafford counties. (Readers of The Free Lance-Star will be familiar with the controversy surrounding the big-pig emblem that once stood triumphantly atop the Stafford location.)

But the lack of tongs in his hand doesn't mean Ivey has removed himself from the all-important barbecuing process. On a recent visit to the Fredericksburg location, he was very much in evidence, smoothly dividing his time between the dining area and the kitchen.

She: Barbecue may be prepared any number of ways, the various virtues of which are hotly debated among aficionados, but the one thing it should never be is pretentious.



Virginia Barbeque's interior reflects an understanding of that, with simple booths and tables, a color scheme that appears an intentional mismatch of checkerboard wallpaper and touches of turquoise, and pig-motif collectibles scattered about.

Orders are also an informal affair, as they are placed and paid for at the counter at the rear, then delivered to the diners. Utensils are plastic, and the soft drinks and iced tea flow freely from self-serve dispensers.

Upbeat music that is recognizable to baby boomers (think "Proud Mary") plays unobtrusively in the background.

He: The one-page menu is all about barbecue: sandwiches, combos (sandwich, two sides and a drink) and platters.

For the egalitarian—or the indecisive—there is the "Novice BBQ Sampler Platter" (9.95), which rewarded me with a trinity of barbecue: generous helpings of lightly vinegary, North Carolina-style pork barbecue; a tomato-sauce version, which Virginia Barbeque dubs "Virginia-style"; and the hand-pulled beef variation touted by Texans.

The wood-smoked, hand-pulled pork barbecues were meltingly tender, the beef slightly less so. But what set all of them well above average was that they were astonishingly lean.

She: Those who tend to think that the only authentic barbecue is of a certain type may find their firmly held stances waffling at Virginia Barbeque. On one visit, a lunch partner ordered her usual preference, a North Carolina-style sandwich, and I went for the Virginia-style (both \$3.95). Within minutes we were sampling each

want to go?

**VIRGINIA BARBEQUE**

**Address:** 451 Jefferson Davis Highway, Fredericksburg (north of Mary Washington Hospital and opposite the rear of James Monroe High School)

**Phone:** 540/368-2800

**Hours:** 11 a.m.–8 p.m. daily

**Prices:** Sandwiches: \$3.95–\$5.25  
Combos (sandwich and sides): \$4.95–\$7.50  
Platters: \$8.95–\$16.95  
Sides: \$1.49  
Drinks: \$1.25  
Takeout and pickup catering available.

**Atmosphere:** Clean, casual and family-oriented, with a friendly, smiling staff. Nonsmoking and wheelchair-accessible.

**Payment:** Major credit cards accepted.

other's selections, and we agreed that the next time around, we would cheerfully order either.

In both cases, the sesame-sprinkled buns were bakery fresh.

He: A wealth of down-home sides are offered (\$1.49, or choice of two with combo orders). I found the coleslaw, laced with colorful carrot strips, a stand-out, and the hush puppies were crisply browned to a corn-infused turn.

I also recommend the corn muffins, which arrived in the form of three semisweet puffs. By contrast, the baked beans, although themselves of good texture, were in a somewhat soupy base and lacked oomph.

She: Virginia Barbeque has a way with spuds. The thick-cut "Bomb" french fries were, as the

teenspeak expression goes, "the bomb" (translation for those of other generations: "far out, dude" and "the cat's meow").

The potato salad offered pieces of firm, bite-size redskin potatoes that skillfully straddled that precious three-minute cooking interval between underdone and mushy. A pleasing hint of dill lurked in the background.

The collard greens would appeal to those who like them very deeply seasoned. Once again, the consistency was spot-on, but the hand that applied the salt and pepper was too heavy for my taste.

He: Virginia Barbeque is tailor-made for the takeout trade, and one affordable selection is the "Family Special" (\$15.95). It offers a pint of any style of pork barbecue, a pint of baked beans, a pint of coleslaw, four pieces of corn bread and four buns. The order was so generous and so well packaged that house guests were battling over the last of the barbecue two days later: Even the buns remained fresh.

Last thoughts. Judging from the Fredericksburg location, it's no surprise that Virginia Barbeques are blooming around the area. It is, rather, a testament to Ivey's acumen in both business and barbecue.

But there's nothing businesslike about the barbecue: It's all pleasure.

She: "Embracing one's inner oink" may be inelegant, but at Virginia Barbeque, it's also appropriate.

*Nancy Dearing Rossbacher and Stephen W. Sylvia publish a Civil War magazine together. She likes to cook. He likes to eat. To reach Rossbacher and Sylvia, e-mail them at editor@nscivilwar.com. Or call 540/374-5448 with comments about today's restaurant review.*

LOOKING FOR A NIGHT LIFE?

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