Barbecue is cooking as craft, food as folk art. It's oak and mesquite, vinegar and molasses, a blending of ingredients and influences that takes in Mexico, the West Indies, and Africa: The barbecue pit is a melting pot.

Put it all together and it's as American as Willie and Waylon, bebop and the Mississippi Delta blues, a good-time food that skips over cultural and social divides. It's down-home and never highfalutin, slow-cooked and eaten fast, a sometimes sweet and always smoky feast that fills the gut as it feeds the soul.

The West is a barbecue frontier, a region unburdened by the orthodoxy of such hot spots as Texas and the Carolinas. The region's one indigenous style, the oak-smoked tri-tip of Santa Maria barbecue (see p. 109), has created a cult of 'cue on California's Central Coast, but it remains a local phenomenon. That said, the West is to barbecue as Switzerland is to international relations: Neutrality should not be mistaken for a lack of interest. Based on the overwhelming and often passionate...
responses we received to a simple request printed in our August 2003 issue—"Help us find great barbecue"—the full gamut of styles can be found here. And in some surprising places too.

San Francisco’s Lower Haight district is a neighborhood teetering between grit and gentrification, east of the once-labeled Haight Ashbury intersection. It’s certainly not without its own counterculture ways: A medical cannabis club operates openly on the street.

They’re smoking at Memphis Minnie’s Bar-B-Que Joint too—brisket, ribs, pork, sausage, and chicken in a big old smoker. The venerable contraction has been dubbed Will’s by the joint’s owner, a self-described one-time chubby little Jewish kid from Brooklyn named Bob Kantor. It all seems fairly improbable, until you learn that the restaurant’s namesake is Kantor’s Memphis-bred mother and that his father owned butcher shops.

Kantor, however, only came to barbecue after years in the culinary business—and almost by accident. He was working as a consultant for a restaurant when its owner suggested they put some barbecue on the menu.

“I started doing research, and within a week, it was like something grabbed me and shook me,” Kantor says. And so 11 years ago he began a Frodo-esque journey, a veritable hickory barge, into the backwoods and back-street citadels and shrines of American barbecue.

Kantor recalls a time in East Texas when he was introduced as a Californian, and there were boos and whistles and shouts as the crowd questioned whether he planned to barbecue Texas and its smokes. Others he met envied his quest, his opportunity to explore and discover the variations in barbecue, from town to town, from valley to hollow.

Indeed, all his peregrinations taught Kantor just how localized barbecue can be. He heard about longtime pit masters using the inner spring of an old mattress to hold the meat while they estimated the proper smoking temperature by the distance that flies hovered off the top of the pit, 6 inches being optimal.

Also, this particular homegrown technique proved to have more anthropological than practical value. But Kantor emerged from his explorations with a clearer understanding of barbecue and his own place in its cosmography.

“I felt like a wandering minstrel, passing the word,” he says. “I’m an unabashed traditionalist, and my overriding concern, in 2004 as I sit here, is that we will lose barbecue in its entirety.”

Then he returns to his roots to convey his sense of urgency, declaring, “Barbecue may go the way of the true New York bagel.”

At Memphis Minnie’s Bar-B-Que Joint in San Francisco, Bob Kantor (at right) has brought soulful “cues to a city better known for dim sum. Minnie’s Haight Street location may be uphill, but Kantor’s succulent smoked ribs and sausages are unabashedly traditional.”
he word barbecue is generally believed to come from the Spanish word barbacoa, which describes a ple-cooking technique first observed in the West Indies. Traditionalists believe that the only true "cue is slow-cooked and smoked over wood; anything else is just not the real deal. Still, with that simple standard, there is ample room for divergence and invention.

Take the wood. In the Southern tradition of barbecue, hickory is the primary wood and is burned down to coals before the meat—almost always pork—is cooked directly over it. In Texas the preference is to cook indirectly, using whole oak or mesquite logs placed to the side of the barbecue to create a smoky flavor in the meat, which is typically beef. These are the only two broadly drawn variations. Some pit masters use pecan or almond wood. Some only want dry wood, while others mix in green wood to slow the cooking process.

And for us, the eating public? Ribs with Smoke is whatever you grew up with, be it pulled pork or spareribs, brisket or beef ribs, served dry, in vinegar or sauce, the shade of a faux Tuscan finish, or in morning tomato-based as dark as a Oaxacan mole.

Kanter believes that many people use their sauces as a way to cover up their lack of smoking technique. He serves four different sauces but leaves it up to the customer to decide which to use and how much to put on the meat.

"Sauce could be the domain of true barbecue," he says. "Asking us an old-time texan, I believe that people who think it's the sauce that makes the barbecue also think that clothes and jewelry make a beautiful woman."

As with any art, barbecue combines accumulated traditions with individual creativity, resulting in something original that nevertheless reflects what preceded it. Perhaps that's why a great barbecue joint is more akin to a community institution than most other restaurants, its owner more restaurateur but the bearer of generations' worth of collective culinary wisdom.

In a cluttered back room at Phillips Bar-B-Que in the Leimert Park neighborhood of Los Angeles, the walls are covered with photos of youth sports teams sponsored by the restaurant and honors received by its owner, Foster Phillips. A native of Kent, Louisiana, Phillips has opened this barbecue spot—a trademark of business—for 25 years. The parking lot is perfumed by the plumes from the big, brick-clad smokers. The lines are invariably long, as regulars await taut-skinned links suffused in a chile-fired sauce, or deep, dusky ribs that give only a hint of tug as teeth pull meat from bone.
“My goal is to give customers the same taste in their mouths that they left with the last time they were here,” Phillips says. “When they come back, I want them to pick up that same taste, to keep that taste, to hold on to that flavor.”

Phillips began barbecuing while in high school. He comes from a family of nine children, and his mother taught household chores to all the kids, boys included. “The only thing I didn’t learn was washing and ironing,” admits Phillips.

Barbecue has been an ongoing education for Phillips. “Before I opened, I went to every walk-in barbecue joint I could find and studied meat in every way that I could,” he says. “I still go around too, maybe bring in food from three or four places and share it with my employees, to let them see what’s going on.”

“I’ve always wanted to be at whatever I do,” Phillips says, “whether it is big or small. It’s hard for me to believe that anyone works harder than me to keep it right. It’s just hard to believe.”

Barbecue is indeed hard work—so time-consuming, in fact, that its true believers contend that the effort alone acts as a disincentive to practicing the traditional method. Proper smoking can take 15 hours, and staff must be carefully trained in the way of the barbecue master. “It has to be nursed and protected, watched and tended,” says Dan Darroch Sr., owner of Hay’s Pit Barbecue in Phoenix. “It really has a good rib, the time, temperature, and smoke draft all have to be right. So do the rubs. You’re dealing with a thin piece of meat between two bones. More is not better, and less is not better. It’s about doing it right. For me, there were thousands of pounds of trial and error.”

That said, Darroch will take the hard work of barbecue over the hard work of his former occupation, running a used-car lot, any day.

With a father from Virginia and a grandfather from Texas, Darroch was never a stranger to the verities of barbecue. He barbecued as a hobby and began experimenting with smokers. He eventually spent 18 months or so creating a smoker that he mounted on an old Chevy pickup chassis.

In 1994 he set up a few card tables and began selling barbecue at his used-car lot near Sky Harbor International Airport. Darroch sold so many sandwiches that first Saturday last year, he began to rethink his future. He opened his two restaurants in 2001 and now employs nine members of his family.

“You sell cars with the right intentions, but they do break down. And to think, it’s not a lot of people don’t make their payments, and as a result you have to go pick up their cars,” he says.

“So I was never sent a Christmas card by anyone I had to repossess. But barbecue? Everyone is happy and excited and thanks you afterward. And it’s a consumable product. They’re always back the next week—or the next day—for more.”

—Barbecue writer by Peter Fish, Matthew Juffs, Steven R. Lorton, Lori Midson, Sharron Niedermeier, Abigail Pearson, Stacy Philips, Virginia Rainey, Sara Schneider, Nina Burke Trivison, and Kate Washington

CATHEDRAL CITY
Tootie’s Texas Barbecue. Texas experience with Willard Sterling and Steve Vinson how brought some fine, fine-gas to the low, low desert. Tootie’s uses green oak and smokes its brisket up to 17 hours, but the flavor, while full, is more subtle than most Texas barbeques. The sides are outstanding, including a creamed corn spiced by jalapeños. $5, closed Sun. & Mon., 68-703 Peres Rd., Ste. A1, 760-252-6938.

LONG BEACH
Lucille’s Smoke Bar-B-Que. Visit Lucille’s at the Long Beach Town Center, and the stick mall location may rate some authenticity claims. But around town, you’ll see Lucille Buchanan’s old smoker, and by the time you see the deep, rich color of the sauce, wood will combine with the smoke, and you’ll be happy. $10, 7341 Carson St., 562-938-7474 (visit www.lucillesbbq.com for other locations).

LOS ANGELES
Woodys Bar-B-Que. Located in the heart of the Sunset Strip, Woodys is a little gem. The meat is tender and juicy, and the sides are just as good. $20, 8666 Sunset Blvd., 323-931-7506.

WOODS PARK
Wood Ranch BBQ & Grill. The first Wood Ranch was in Simi Valley, but now it’s a chain with four locations in Los Angeles. The meats are smoked over a hickory wood fire, and the sides are just as good. $25, 8880 Wood Ranch Ave., 805-523-7253.

Van Nuys
Dr. Hogly Who’s Tylers Texas BBQ. Since 1969, Sepulveda Boulevard diners have frequented Tylers, which features great brisket and ribs. $25, 8880 Sepulveda Blvd., 818-368-6800.

In Phoenix, Hay’s Pit Barbecue got a high-octane start when owner Dan Darroch Sr. employed a Chevy pickup chassis to build his first smoker. “What were the pleasures of being a barbecue king?” asks Darroch.

“Everyone is happy and excited and thanks you afterward.”