

# American barbecue is having a moment – here’s how to experience the best of it

Festivals and competitions are arriving in Britain, but to get the essence of true low and slow cuisine, head to these American cities

[Amy Tara Koch](#)

Related Topics

- [North America,](#)
- [Barbecue](#)

14 November 2025 11:00am GMT



Meatopia food festival, an American export, has been popping up in London since 2013 Credit: MOAI PR

The charm of honey-coloured market towns and bucolic sheep-speckled hills is what attracts most people to [the Cotswolds](#). I went for the [UK Barbecue Championships](#), a two-day competition where a dozen or so pitmasters vied for the title of brisket best-in-show on a fruit farm in Winchcombe. My husband is a judge for the Kansas City Barbecue Society, which is the entity that establishes rules and sends officials to facilitate events, so I tagged along to observe.



Texas and Kansas City have played an important role in inspiring the British barbecue scene Credit: Meatopia

In a meadow fringed by lush strawberry patches, teams including the Beefy Boys, Bunch of Swines and Bad Influence BBQ from America huddled over grills and smokers – even camping overnight to monitor slow-cooking meats – while Tubby Tom, an animal rights activist turned barbecue condiment kingpin, offered demos of Tomahawk steaks encrusted with his namesake seasonings. “Fifteen years ago, barbecue in Britain was grilling a hot dog outside,” said Kevin Durrant-Jones, who organises contests and promotes barbecue happenings in Britain through his organisation CompBBQ. “When the Grillstock festival launched in 2010 with American-style competition, ‘low and slow’ was revolutionary. Between that and shows such as BBQ Pitmasters, dozens of live fire events were spawned.”

#### Advertisement

Most of those events unfold as festivals that meld elements of American barbecue, as well as others that reflect Britain’s internationality. There is [Meatopia](#), an American export that has been popping up in London since 2013, while over in Ireland, [The Big Grill](#) has been bringing an international crew of chefs to Dublin, along with purveyors from the wild food scene (game butchers, hunters, foragers), since 2014.



Meatopia festival invites some of the very best live-fire chefs from around the world for a weekend-long celebration

More than 33,000 visitors attend the annual [Smoke and Fire Festival](#) (there are two weekend events, Ascot and Maldon), to interact with 22 high-profile pitmasters. There is also a freestyle competition where teams duke it out for prize money. Live-fire restaurants have also sprung up, with noteworthy openings including [Ox Club](#) in Leeds, [Stow](#) in Manchester, [Humo](#) in London's Mayfair and three in Hackney: [Acme Fire Cult](#), [Brat Climpson's Arch](#) and [From The Ashes](#).

It's all very exciting, and interesting to observe the role that Texas and Kansas City have played in inspiring the British scene. For enthusiasts who want to take their passion to the next level and experience the cultural backdrop to the cuisine, a trip to the US is in order. There, you'll see the landscape and meet the characters behind America's contemporary barbecue movement.

#### Austin

Texas looms large in the canon of American barbecue and Austin's version of the state's hallowed fare, plus its honky tonk dance halls, dive bars and cowboy cool culture, makes it the perfect test-drive destination. There are more than 177 barbecue restaurants here starring what is known as the Texas Trinity: brisket, pork ribs, and sausage.

#### Advertisement

Ali Clem serves up simply peppered brisket, jumbo spare ribs and smoked turkey, so revered that she garnered a Michelin star for her restaurant [La Barbecue](#) last year. Of note are her kicky sides – Chipotle slaw, cucumber kimchi, pickled jalapenos – and collaborations with



other outlets such as Rockman Bakery, which yielded the oft-instagrammed croissant boat blooming with chopped brisket, mac and cheese, and spicy garlic pickles.



Leroy and Lewis, which was also awarded a Michelin star in 2024, is part of Austin’s new school of barbecue Credit: Jake Hatfield

Having starred on BBQ Pitmasters, penned three bestselling cookbooks and earned countless accolades (from “best BBQ in the known universe” by Texas Monthly and “best joint in USA” by Bon Appetit), [Aaron Franklin](#) is an Austin icon credited with inspiring a new generation of pitmasters when he opened his namesake restaurant in 2011. You can still find him there, manning the counter and hobnobbing with diners (when not supervising the pit) as they tuck into bark-rich brisket, pulled pork, succulent pork ribs and gargantuan beef short ribs that are slow-cooked on smokers he built himself. Around-the-corner lines start early and it’s all over when the “Sorry, sold out! Come back soon!” sign appears.

#### Advertisement

At a 1950s strip mall, cops, construction workers, families and University of Texas college students congregate beneath the glow of a dozen vintage neon signs for the kind of low-and-slow glory that cemented central Texas’s position on the global food map. [Stiles Switch](#) serves black-bark brisket, moist pink pork ribs and a variety of sausages (think chipotle and jalapeno cheddar), plus daily specials. The sleeper hit: cold-smoked, flash-fried chicken wings topped with a creamy white vinegar sauce.

“You can have a balanced meal with barbecue,” Evan Leroy tells me over a platter of flat iron steak, pulled whole hog, beef cheeks, accented with kimchi and cauliflower burnt ends. [Leroy and Lewis](#), which was also awarded a Michelin star in 2024, is part of Austin’s new school of barbecue, one that leans into unique cuts of meat and healthy sides such as grain salad and

miso-glazed carrots (frito pie and chicken-fried beets not so much). Leroy also offers a steak night that involves a pit tour and a 3.5lb porterhouse. Lines are long and the dinners get booked months in advance.

Advertisement

**Where to stay:** Austin Proper Hotel



Austin Proper Hotel, Austin

This Kelly Wearstler-designed boutique hotel combines velvets, textured wallpapers, vintage objects and carved wood furniture. Rooms feature dramatic damask headboards, massive stone and marble bathrooms, and electric blackout blinds. Cool off in the rooftop pool.

Doubles from £374. Read the full review [here](#).

Kansas City

In the American “cue-niverse”, Kansas City’s tagline is “sweet with a little heat”, meaning meat is rubbed with paprika, chilli powder and cumin, then basted in a sweet, tomato-based sauce. Beyond brisket, chicken and pork ribs, burnt ends are the city’s calling card. In the 1970s, chefs decided to recast the fatty, charred points of the brisket as a delicacy. They were cubed, basted and re-smoked into what enthusiasts call “meat marshmallows”.



Joe's Kansas City Bar-B-Que was founded by Jeff and Joy Stehney some 30 years ago, when they pooled their competition winnings to sell their wares inside a gas station

With the [Kansas City Barbecue Society](#) (KCBS) in its backyard, it's not surprising that many of the region's 100 barbecue restaurants are helmed by pitmasters from the competition circuit. Take [Joe's Kansas City Bar-B-Que](#), begun by Jeff and Joy Stehney some 30 years ago, when they pooled their competition winnings to sell their wares inside a gas station. Lines snake around the building for the burnt ends, pulled pork and brisket described by Anthony Bourdain as having "flavour up the yin-yang".

#### Advertisement

When brothers and competition pitmasters Mike and Joe Pearce describe their barbecue as "award-winning", they mean it. The duo parlayed their success on the KCBS circuit into [Slaps](#), which turns out competition-style 3.5-inch thick St Louis cut pork ribs; thinly sliced, pull-apart brisket; smoked chicken and gooey potato casserole.





Slaps BBQ in Kansas City was set up by brothers and competition pitmasters Mike and Joe Pearce

Other essential “cue-ing”: [LC’s Bar-B-Q](#) and [Big T’s](#), both iconic (seriously) frill-free roadside joints with sticky floors and smoke billowing from their hard-working pits.

Justin Easterwood’s [Chef J](#) is the new kid on the block. In a century-old brick warehouse with two pits, some coolers and a concession stand-turned makeshift kitchen, he produces fatty, bark-rich brisket and impeccably charred pork ribs, along with cheesy smoked corn and chilli-crisp broccoli slaw sides that consistently sell out. His cut-fresh method contrasts with many of the town’s legacy spots. “I wanted to bring back rustic, gritty, tending the fire craft. Every piece of meat is tended throughout the cooking process. Nothing is automated,” he said.