

Nebraska Geographic

with *ALAN J. BARTELS*

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Will Travel For Barbecue

During my travels I've met people venturing from near and far after hearing about a place with amazing coffee, the world's most scrumptious pie, the best burgers, the most divine donuts, and so on. You name the food product and there is a throng of devotees who hit the road to find out for themselves. I imagine groups called funny names like the Kolache Krazies, Nacho Nuts, or the Reuben Reapers. I can relate. Anybody want to join my newly founded BBQ Bunch? Haha.

I brake for barbecue, and I am serving up a tasty trio of favorite Nebraska barbecue joints discovered during my travels of our state.

If there's anything that defines smalltown America, it is Bulldogger's BBQ in downtown Valentine. Heath Bristol, who owns Bulldogger's with his wife, Courtney, served in the United States Navy. The couple gives a discount to military veterans. As a veteran myself, I salute the Bristols for their generosity.

Customers sit at picnic tables outside or take orders to-go. The menu includes brisket, pulled pork, chicken, spareribs, and smoked sausage. All the meat is smoked inhouse. The sauces – spicy, sweet, and Carolina – are homemade, too, as are the coleslaw, potato salad, branding beans, and the other side dishes. Heath is a Valentine native. Courtney is from the southern United States, which explains the southern sweet tea on the menu. The Bristols told me that this veteran- and woman-owned business is the only barbecue joint for more than 100 miles.

Bulldogger's is seasonal, open April through October, and sometimes earlier or later, depending on the Nebraska Sandhills weather.

In southeast Nebraska, the community of Ashland lays claim to a Nebraska barbecue landmark. Parker's Smokehouse bills itself as "BBQ with Soul."

I suggest ordering one of their battered Onion Flowers before even picking up the good-sized menu. You can never go wrong with one of the fire grilled burgers, Georgia Pulled Pork, Smoked Texas Beef Brisket, or the Nebraska Melt sandwich piled high with shaved smoked prime rib. When I look at this menu it is hard for me to ever get past the BBQ Nachos. That culinary creation is my favorite, even though I have never been able to eat it all. Like any good BBQ joint there is cornbread on the menu, and a hefty adult beverage selection including Nebraska craft brews. Cheers!

The Nebraska barbecue scene heated up a notch or two when Uncle Jarrol's Pub-B-Que opened in 2016. This fixture of fantastic food became important to me when

I was working in Norfolk. Although there were many great restaurants near my office, I often found myself heading to the west side of town for supper.

Owner Jared Rodgers and I hit it off right away over our shared appreciation of good food and great Nebraska craft beers. Jared, and his parents Rex and Mary – who very often were working in the restaurant after getting off for the day from their other jobs – became my friends. When I stop to see them these days it is more about seeing my friends than eating. But, at an eatery like this, you make room even if you aren't hungry. The Carolina Nachos were my favorite until the first time I tried the Burnt End Meal. Now, I can't decide between the two.

The Burnt End Meal at Uncle Jarrol's features the glorious sandwich topped with the best part of a brisket, as well as a cornbread muffin, and two sides.

Sides. Everything is good here, but the side dishes here are award-winning, and that is not an exaggeration. I won't go through the entire list of available side dishes, but I will mention my favorite – Corn Salad. This is served ice cold and topped with crushed Fritos corn chips. So simple but so satisfying.

When I stopped to see the Rodgers family in August, Corn Salad came up, and it nearly brought me to tears.

A recent Facebook post announcing the closure of Uncle Jarrol's shocked me. The business has thrived thanks to countless hours of hard work from the family and staff, and a devoted and supportive customer base. The business even thrived during Covid. Now, it is time for Jared and the crew to move onto other endeavors. And finally, Rex and Mary can enjoy their much-deserved retirement. And that's not all of the good news.

Uncle Jarrol's isn't closing until November 1st. That means you and me, and barbecue fans from far and wide still have time to get there a time or two or three to savor the flavor. I'll save room for the Trashcan Nachos and the Bernt Ends. Maybe I will see you there.

Mary, I wasn't joking when I suggested that you share the Corn Salad recipe with me and thank you to the entire Rodgers family for your friendship and for keeping me fed all these years.

I hope this column got all of our readers' taste buds collectively clamoring for a quality Nebraska barbecue experience. Feel free to email me if you'd like to share some favorites of your own – maybe I will include them in a future *Nebraska Geographic* column.

And if you happen into Uncle Jarrol's Pub-B-Que, Bulldogger's BBQ, or Parker's Smokehouse, please tell them "hello" from me.

Safe travels – and watch for deer!