



OUT OF THE WAY EATS

by Bob McEowen

The Bootheel is like nowhere else in Missouri. While most of the state is covered with rolling pasture or rugged forests, extreme southeast Missouri lies in the Mississippi Delta — a vast alluvial plain where the steepest rise is often a highway overpass and cotton grows in fields along the roads.

The food here, especially barbecue, is different, too. Travelers expecting beef brisket slathered in sweet sauce may feel as much out of place dining in Missouri's Bootheel as they do driving through the region.

Barbecue — almost always pork — is cooked dry in this section of the South, where Missouri claimed a corner out of northeast Arkansas. A mix of spices placed on the meat before cooking provides the seasoning. One of the best examples of this style of cooking is found at Strawberry's Midtown Recreation and Dining Room, a hometown pool hall and restaurant in sleepy Holcomb, just 3 miles from the eastern Arkansas line.

In fact, Jerry "Straw" Holsten claims his barbecued ribs and pork steaks are the best in the Mississippi Delta.

"I have no problem saying that," Straw says. "I can back it up. All you have to do is taste it."

Although three bottles of sauce (original, sweet & spicy and hot) sit on each table, Straw says his secret isn't in the sauce. It's Strawberry's Grand Champion Shake-on Bar-B-Que Seasoning, a patented blend of spices he sells online and in grocery stores.

"The reason this is so much better than anybody else's dry rub, this has 15 different spices in it. The other dry rubs usually have about five or six spices," he says. "You've got more flavor, a lot more flavor, than your normal dry rub."

Technically, the product is not a rub. It is simply shaken on until the meat becomes the color of the spice mix. The spices seep into the meat as it cooks and seal the flavors inside.

Tasting Strawberry's center-cut pork steak is one thing. Finishing it is another challenge altogether. Order the \$11 pork steak dinner and you'll receive two plates when your meal arrives. One 9-inch platter barely holds the meat — a 2-pound slab of pork, sliced from the Boston Butt, a cut from the front shoulder of a pig.

"They're about an inch and a half thick when they go on the grill," Straw says. "When you cook them six hours, they'll lose about a quarter inch."

Your other plate will contain your choice of three sides. While Strawberry's offers French fries and onion rings, the most popular selections

Strawberry's

The seasoning is the secret at Holcomb's home of the 2-pound pork steak



Jerry "Straw" Holsten and his wife, Sheila, display the \$11 center-cut pork steak dinner served at Strawberry's Midtown Dining Room in Holcomb.

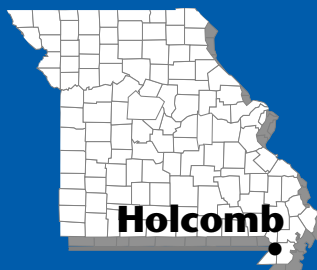
Strawberry's Midtown Recreation and Dining Room

Specialties: Hickory-smoked barbecue pork steaks, baby back ribs, pulled pork, hamburgers and pub fare.

Price: Sandwiches \$2.50 and up. Dinners from \$7 to \$12. Cash, checks, Mastercard and Visa accepted.

Details: Lounge open from 8:30 a.m. to 11 p.m., Monday through Saturday, with full menu until 9 p.m. daily. Dining room from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m., Tuesday through Saturday. Smoking permitted in lounge.

Directions: Located at 107 Main St. in Holcomb. From Interstate 55, take Highway 412 west to Kennett, then north on Highway 25, about 10 miles. Log onto www.strawsbbq.com or call (573) 792-9689 for more information, or to order seasoning.



fork. The baby back ribs (\$12 for a half rack with sides) fall off the bone.

Straw honed his techniques in barbecue contests during the early '80s. He first competed at the Show-Me State BBQ Cook-off in nearby Kennett and came in dead last in every category he entered. Undaunted, he went back to the smoker and perfected his skills and seasonings.

He eventually won grand champion in Kennett in 1994 and earned an invitation to the "Memphis in May" World Championship Barbecue Cooking Contest where he finished in the top 10.

Although Straw has owned his pool hall in Holcomb since 1973, he didn't serve food there until 1996. To attract more customers on slow nights, he began offering barbecued ribs on Tuesday and Thursday nights. He's rarely had a slow night since.

With two dining rooms added in subsequent years, Strawberry's can now seat 210 patrons. A catering facility a block away accommodates another 75. Straw and his staff of 37 employees cook about 5,000 pounds of meat each week, including about 200 pork steaks and 100 slabs of ribs each day on weekends.

"On weekends we have 200 or 250 reservations, besides the walk-ins," Straw says, adding that waiting customers often line up on the sidewalk.

Depending on which of three doors customers enter, they'll either find a small town pool hall with a sports bar feel, or one of two pleasant home-style dining rooms. But even in the lounge, customers are there to eat.

"We still have some regular five o'clock people who come in and have their drink at happy hour, but they leave with the dinner crowd," Straw says. "The food has totally taken over the bar."

Strawberry's does a great lunch business with local residents and students from Holcomb High School stopping in for a Strawberry or Sheilaburger — a half- or quarter-pound bacon cheeseburger. Other items on the regular menu include slawburgers, shrimp and chicken baskets, burritos, baked hot ham and cheese and fish or chicken sandwiches.

With four pool tables, arcade machines, a bevy of televisions tuned to sports channels and karaoke on Saturday nights, Strawberry's is a welcoming place. But it's not the recreation side of Strawberry's Midtown Recreation and Dining Room the lines form for on Friday and Saturday nights. It's those tender slabs of ribs and the enormous pork steaks prepared with Straw's special seasoning.

"It's not a bar anymore," he says. "It's all food."

— like the vinegar-base Cole slaw — reflect a more Southern, and certainly homemade, flair.

"We make our own beans. We put hamburger meat in them when we cook them with different spices says Sheila Holsten, Straw's wife. "Instead of potato salad like everybody else has, we do hot scalloped potatoes."

The scalloped potatoes are wonderful. The pork steak is so tender it could be eaten with a plastic