

New Heartland Harvest Garden ★ Summer Events & Festivals

MissouriLife

2008 IRMA MAGAZINE OF THE YEAR

THE STATE'S BEST barbeque

Our Guide
to the Top Joints



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STRAWBERRY'S
HOLCOMB
SPECIALTY: PORK STEAKS
573-792-9689



The center-cut pork steak dinner is the house specialty at Strawberry's, owned by Jerry "Straw" Holsten and his wife, Sheila, in Holcomb.

On a back road in the Bootheel, I had a barbecue epiphany. Just outside Puxico, at the Mingo National Wildlife Refuge welcome center, a crowd had assembled to discuss agritourism. When it was my turn to speak, I tried to flatter the locals. "When folks talk about barbecue, they mention Kansas City," I offered. "But I know where to find the best barbecue in Missouri. It's right here in Stoddard County, down the road in Dexter." As soon as I mentioned two of my longtime favorite southeast Missouri barbecue stops—The Hickory Log and Dexter Bar-B-Que—folks started squirming and shaking their heads, flailing their arms, and shouting "Strawberry's!" I was puzzled, not knowing what strawberries had to do with barbecue. The crowd kept chanting, "Strawberry's ... Strawberry's."

I bit. "Strawberries?"

"In Holcomb ... in Holcomb," they chanted. Thus, I discovered a new favorite barbecue joint in the tiny Dunklin County town of Holcomb. Dunklin is Missouri's tallest county, standing almost forty-four miles from its sole to its crown. It's shaped like the left side of an hourglass and stuffed mostly with cotton. Near the tiny waistline of this corseted county sits Holcomb. And Strawberry's.

Indeed, the slabs at Strawberry's are so tender, the meat falls off the bone from the vibrations of your voice. The sauce stands up to any Kansas City masterpiece, and if you want dry ribs Memphis style, Strawberry's rivals the legendary Rendezvous, a block from Beale Street.

Not long after my first visit to Strawberry's, *Gourmet Magazine* contacted the Missouri Division of Tourism. They wanted Missouri to shove a favorite local dish under the noses of hundreds of food writers at *Gourmet's* international food show in Los Angeles. The magazine offered us a deal our media buyer said we couldn't refuse. I agreed, seeing the value in our promotion, but only if we sent barbecue—not just any barbecue, but true representatives of Missouri, prepared with no shortcuts. Strawberry's topped my list. Our crew recruited Gates Bar-B-Q, Fiorella's Jack Stack Barbeque, Arthur Bryant's Barbeque, and half a dozen other smokin' savants. We packed a hundred slabs of ribs into dry ice for the trip west. When the smoke cleared at L.A.'s Staples Center, Missouri ribs stole the show. Many attendees had never tasted barbecue before, and word traveled like a wild mesquite fire through the crowd. Lines of barbecue seekers snaked out the arena and around the block.

In an informal survey, only a half slab of them had ever heard of a pork steak. Funny thing, pork steaks. Missourians take for granted that the world enjoys them, but outside of a circle of states bordering Missouri, nobody knows what they are. Some people might respond if you said "sliced pork butt." But why call them that? They're pork steaks.

Like pork steaks, barbecue is a regional specialty. Everybody south of the Mason-Dixon line believes they have the best barbecue. Carolina. Georgia. Tennessee. Texans, bless 'em, are no different, just more obnoxious about it. They think they originated barbecue.

LET 'EM THINK
WHAT THEY WANT.
I KNOW WHAT GOURMETS KNOW:
eat MO barbecue.