

Lexington Barbecue #1 has defined excellence since Wayne Honey Monk started slow-cooking pork shoulders in hickory and oak coal smoke in 1962. Accompanied by good hushpuppies and Q-sauced slaw, the meat is a festival of mellow piggy tenderness with crunchy nuggets from the outside of the shoulder.

Lexington, North Carolina, is to hog barbecue what Lockhart, Texas, is to beef: a Mecca with far more than its fair share of great eateries that attract pilgrims from around the nation and the world. Lexington's best is appropriately named Lexington Barbecue #1, and there are many aficionados who consider its slow-cooked pork shoulder to be the definitive barbecue not just of Lexington or of North Carolina, but of our solar system. (In 1983 the North Carolina General Assembly designated Lexington as the "Hickory-Cooked Barbecue Capital of Piedmont North Carolina.")

"Monk's Place," as locals know it (in deference to founder Wayne "Honey" Monk), looks like a barn with a line of smelters attached to the back. From those smelters issues the aroma of burning hickory and oak wood and the sweet smell of slow-cooking pork, one of the most appetite-inducing aromas in the world. No complicated techniques or secret sauces are used in the cooking process. The shoulders simply loll in smoke for hours, becoming ambrosial. The meat is hacked into a hash that, while sloppy, is as elegant as silk -- smooth in flavor as well as texture, but punctuated with a few chewy shreds of bark from the outside of the shoulder. The hacked meat gets only enough sauce to coax out full flavor and is served on a bun with slaw or in a small yellow cardboard boat with slaw in the other half or on a plate. Like the meat, the slaw is judiciously flavored with a vinegar/sweet red barbecue sauce. The slaw-and-pork's perfect partner is a portion of crunch-crustured hushpuppies with creamy insides.

Honey Monk's is a straightforward eatery with booths and tables and car-hop service in the parking lot. Much business is take out -- by the sandwich, or in multi-pound portions for parties at home. My last visit was on Christmas Eve day about 10am. Every seat in the place was empty but the parking lot was full, and at the counter inside, controlled pandemonium reigned as crowds of barbecue lovers received the pounds of meat, quarts of slaw and scores of hushpuppies they were taking home for holiday eats.



The classic Lexington barbecue sandwich: pork shoulder chopped into moist hash, barely flavored with vinegar sauce and crowned with zesty slaw -- all in a supersoft bun.



This big eating barn is one of the nation's top barbecue destinations.