

## Letter From the Lower Right

by John Shelton Reed

### Shall We Gather by the River?



When I was invited last spring to be a judge at the Memphis in May World Championship Barbecue Cooking Contest some envious backbiters put it about that it wasn't because I'm well-known as a discriminating *ami de swine*, but because my sister knows the woman who picks the judges. I have just one thing to say to them: Eat your heart out.

Naturally I jumped on the chance like a dog on a rib bone. Everyone knows that the annual Memphis contest offers not just some of the best 'cue in the world but a complete barbecultural experience. Last year, for instance, I heard that the festival drew entire platoons of Elvis impersonators, not to mention a contestant billing himself as "M. C. Hamhock" who promoted his product with a rap jingle:

Don't need no knife, don't need  
no fork,  
Just wrap your lips around my  
pork.

So it was that I found myself winging over to Memphis one lovely Friday in May, eating American Airlines' peanuts and reading their copy of *Entertainment Weekly*, where I found a record review that began: "For many music fans north of the Mason-Dixon line, contemporary white Southern culture is nothing but an *Easy Rider* cliché of booze, bikes, and bad attitude." Yeeee-haw! In your face, Yankee music fans. Pig—sooey!

On the ground in Memphis, my sister and I walked down Beale Street toward the riverside park where the contest was being held, past the usual street vendors offering assorted Afro-schlock and Deadhead tie-dye. When we came to one selling plastic pig-snouts we knew we were getting close. Soon the unmistakable smell of hickory smoke assailed us and we rounded a bend into the park to behold one hundred and

eighty-odd tents, booths, pavilions, kiosks, huts, gazebos, and God knows what all else, stretched out before us, literally on the riverbank, just a few feet from the mighty Mississippi. It was an amazing sight, its surreality heightened by daredevil youths bungee-jumping from a crane on the bluff above us and by the tract I was given as I entered the park, a handy guide to "What to Do in Case You Miss the Rapture." (Just a tip: if you take any marks or prints on your forehead or hands you'll be sorry.)

We wandered about, gaping. Some mom-and-pop operations made do with folding lawn chairs and simple funeral home tents, but other teams had assembled two- and three-story structures with latticework, decks, statuary, and hanging plants. Each team had a name—I'll spare you, but something about barbecue seems to provoke bad puns—and some also had mottos, like "Hogs smell better barbecued" and "We serve no swine before it's [*sic*] time." Portable generators powered everything from electric fans to fountains and neon signs, and over their constant drone mighty sound systems pumped out music, mostly country, Cajun, or rap, but I also caught the strains of the Village People's "YMCA."

Each team had a smoker, of course, and some had two or three. They ranged from backyard Weber pots to a tractor-trailer behemoth billed as the world's largest portable barbecue cooker; most, however, were roughly coffin-sized, some of them obviously off-the-rack, but many pieced together from 55-gallon drums and stovepipe. Any doubts that barbecue contests are serious business were dispelled by the trophies on display: some teams had more brass than the U. S. Army. And everywhere you looked you saw the pig-totem of the People of the Swine.

Now, for years I've kept a mental log of barbecue joint signs. I've seen pigs reclining, running, and dancing; pigs with bibs, with knives and forks, with crowns and scepters. I've seen pigs as beauty contest winners and pigs in cowboy hats, one with a banjo. I've seen Mr. and Mrs. Pig dressed for a night on the town, and Mr. and Mrs. Pig as American Gothic. But I've never seen

pigs like I saw in Memphis. Pigs in chefs' hats and volunteer firemen's helmets. A pig in a Memphis State football uniform triumphant over some University of Tennessee pigs. A pig in a Superman suit rising from the flames. Lots of pigs drinking beer and, on the T-shirts of a team called the Rowdy Southern Swine, a whole trainload of partying pigs. A pig reclining in a skillet; another on a grill, drinking beer. Two pigs basting a little gnomish person on a spit. It's a hard call, but my favorite was probably some pigs with wings and halos, from a team called Hog Heaven.

This year Italy was being honored by the festival, so a number of teams struck what they took to be Italian notes. (I gather that last year's honoree, New Zealand, inspired mostly tasteless sheep jokes.) Some booths were decorated with hanging bunches of plastic grapes or simulated marble columns, and there were almost as many Italian flags as Confederate ones. T-shirts said "Ciao Down." And of course the pig-signs got into the act. Pigs ate pizza. Pigs wore handlebar mustaches. Pigs reclined in gondolas. Pigs stomped grapes. Pigs posed in gladiator gear and togas and Mafia outfits. A piece of doggerel posted in one booth combined the common themes of Italy, mortality, and beer:

Arrivederci my pug-nosed pal  
We'll meet again at a different  
locale  
You in your mud, me drinking a  
Bud  
Way up in the final corral.

If any actual Italians were present to receive this hands-across-the-sea homage I didn't run into them, although I did meet some Swedes, who were there to see how a barbecue contest is run before starting one of their own (a scary thought). I was disappointed not to see a single Elvis impersonator. Not one. On the other hand there were, considering the season, very few politicians, and there were no street mimes at all.

In the 90-degree Memphis heat, female attire ran to haltertops and cutoffs, often decorated behind with stickers saying things like "HOT," "Can't Touch This," "Roman Hands," and "USDA

Choice,” lovingly applied to passing butts by freelance inspectors in pig noses. I couldn’t help but think of a recent grim “feminist-vegetarian” monograph called *The Sexual Politics of Meat*. Dropped here by the banks of the Mississippi, its poor author would probably have been carried off gibbering. (Later I picked up a copy of *National Barbecue News* in which a columnist urged that those who suffer from HIV—high intake of vegetables—should be treated with compassion.)

Some men wore overalls, Western clothes, or biker gear, but most wore shorts and T-shirts, often revealing all too plainly what beer and barbecue can do to the male physique. Overdressed and hot in the khakis and seersucker I’d worn on the plane, I reflected that those of us from Back East have to uphold standards, but welcomed the frequent spritzes from the water guns of good-natured party animals.

At the judges’ tent we encountered a man with rows of rib bones worn on his chest like decorations. Given the atrocious puns I’d already been subjected to, I didn’t have to ask (rib bones=ribbons, get it?). He was dispensing barbecue wisdom like “Both the pork and the cook should be well-basted.” I’ll bet you say that to all the girls, I thought. My judicial duties wouldn’t begin until the next day, so we set off to take in the showmanship competition.

“Showmanship” was judged on the basis of musical routines with barbecue and Italian themes, and most strong efforts seemed to come from teams of corporation or government agency employees who brought a sort of office party atmosphere to the proceedings. “White boys can’t dance,” my sister muttered, while we were watching one of these efforts. I reminded her that black ones probably couldn’t either after drinking as much beer as these guys had. Shoot, they were doing pretty well to stand.

A group from Southern Bell presented a typical offering. Set in “Mama Bella’s Pizzeria,” it began with a grape-stomping number, followed by “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes” (“They asked me how I knew / I’d be barbecue”), a fine “Barbara Ann” take-off (“You got me smokin’ and a-grillin’ / Sauce will be a-spillin’ / Barbecue, bar bar, bar barbecue”), three girls singing “Where the Boars Are,” and a mildly risqué send-up of an old Platters number (“Only you /

Can be my barbecue”). At the end the whole cast joined in a dance number inspired by the idea of barbecue pizza. Inevitably, several other skits celebrated this concoction, which I gather is actually served as a regular thing at one Memphis restaurant. I ate some at the judges’ reception and it’s not quite as vile as it sounds.

Alas, the showmanship we saw was rather tame—nothing to match M. C. Hamcock. For genuine unglued weirdness we had to wait until that evening, when the featured act on the big stage turned out to be none other than my old Raleigh buddy the Reverend Billy C. Wirtz, down from Nashville where he moved last year to pursue his dream. An audience of several thousand rowdy Southern pork-eaters sat rapt as Billy regaled us with songs about truck-driving lesbians from outer space and other products of his off-center mind. After the show I introduced Billy to my sister, and he took us back to his van where he gave us each a bottle of snake oil.

The end to a perfect day. And the serious business of the contest—judging the pork—hadn’t even begun.

Next month: *Judgment Day*.

*John Shelton Reed writes from Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where some of his best friends are vegetarians. Others are pigs.*

## Letter From Paris

by Curtis Cate

### Grasshoppers and Ants



Many American children who are brought up on Mother Goose stories, as well as other fairy tales, may not know that their author was a 17th-century Frenchman, Charles Perrault. They may also not realize that the fable of the melodious grasshopper (in actual fact a cicada) who whiles away the warm summer months in full-throated song, while the busy ant stocks up provisions for the bitter winter—so charmingly illustrated years ago by Walt Disney in one of his first “Silly Symphonies”—was the brainchild of another 17th-century Frenchman, Jean de La Fontaine.

This might seem a roundabout way of leading up to Edith Cresson—who was

appointed French prime minister in May 1991 and then resigned after the Socialists’ big defeat last March—but for the fact that it was she herself, an outspoken defender of French industrial interests, who used the famous simile to warn her overly nonchalant compatriots—implicitly likened to easygoing grasshoppers—about the looming threat posed, not only to France but to Western Europe as a whole, by the ant-like industriousness of the Japanese.

Many attempts have been made by commentators to explain why President Mitterrand ever chose in the first place a woman deputy to replace his enemy, Michel Rocard—an enemy because he long ago founded a Socialist Party splinter-group, dared prematurely to stake out his own presidential ambitions, and managed to survive three years in office with his popularity in public-opinion polls virtually undiminished (a feat no French premier has achieved since Georges Pompidou). If this gamble was intended to curry favor with feminine voters, who now outnumber French menfolk, it clearly failed. Edith Cresson—who had held the ministerial posts of Agriculture (1981-1983), Foreign Trade (1983-1986), and European Affairs (1988-1990)—was no Margaret Thatcher, and within weeks of her appointment her rating in the polls had sunk to a level unequaled by any of her predecessors. It was, furthermore, an act of rashness to pick a woman who once belonged to the presidential *serail* (*seraglio*), for this offered Jean Amadou, the witty scriptwriter, and his puppet-operating colleagues, a golden opportunity for mercilessly lampooning her past relations with her “*chou-chou*” and “*chéri*” (François Mitterrand) in Stéphane Collaro’s *Bébête Show*, where she acquired the name of Amabotte (freely translated—the Boot-Licker) and was presented to television viewers in the guise of a fawning, doll-like creature, ever ready to drool at the mouth in the presence of her god and master.

I must confess that, notwithstanding her *parler cru* (crude talk) and certain unnecessary lapses—such as suggesting that one Englishman in every four is a “pansy”—I felt a lurking sympathy for Edith Cresson. For regardless of the Socialist François Mitterrand might have chosen to succeed Michel Rocard, he or she would have faced the same daunting problems and the same social unrest.

There are a number of reasons for