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## The Pork Is in the Mail

By: Francine Maroukian  
August 12, 2008

Years ago it was impossible to get your hands on great Southern food unless you actually lived down the road from it. Or maybe you had a relative who loved you enough to bring back some Rendezvous ribs from a trip to Memphis, or if they really loved you, a Newsom's aged country ham from Kentucky. These were foods that you had to travel to enjoy, but now they can travel to you. The easy part is picking up the phone or going online. The hard part is waiting for the mailman.

### 1. Rendezvous Ribs Memphis, Tennessee

It was 1948 and Charlie Vergos was working away in his basement tavern, selling beer and sandwiches, when he discovered a hidden coal chute in the outside wall. Lightbulb: a ventilated cookingspace/grill and the birth of the legendary Rendezvous rib. Unlike other Memphis-style ribs ("wet," i.e., basted with sauce, or "dry," i.e., seasoned without liquid), 'Vous ribs are basted just before serving with a vinegar solution followed by a dusting of spice mix (or "shake") containing the unusual addition of bay leaf and oregano, an underlying flavor link to the family's Greek heritage. Today the Rendezvous, situated in another subterranean space only fifty yards from its original location, seats 750 people and turns out about eight thousand pounds of ribs a week from four fire pits. Second-generation John Vergos makes sure the Rendezvous maintains the consistency required to keep local barbecue believers happy. "My father and I had differing opinions, as fathers and sons do. But we always agreed that our best investment is our employees," he says. The pitmen and servers are a network of brothers and sons and cousins, some in residence long enough to be recognized by three generations of customers, like senior statesman Robert Stewart, Sr., a forty-five-year veteran, and his son Robert Stewart, who's 'Voused with the best of them for twenty-five years of his own. 'Vous ribs: \$99 for two slabs, each with 12-14 bones; hogsfly.com; 888-464-7359

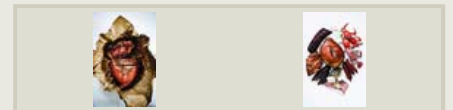
### 2. Anson Mills Grits and Rice Columbia, South Carolina

With evidence of "Korn" porridge documented in the Charleston area as early as 1670, Glenn Roberts had no doubt that grits are at the foundation of Lowcountry regional cooking. All he needed was the right heirloom corn. But finding it took fieldwork. To Roberts, a former historical restoration consultant, heirloom is defined as "preindustrial," and that meant sourcing a variety widely known as plantation corn, common prior to the Civil War. He traveled the back roads, looking out over the fields for "tall corn"—that is, corn that might be used as silage. When he finally located a preindustrial variety, Roberts couldn't just snatch it and go. The need for documentation meant he had to interview the farmer who grew the corn—a bit of a problem. Since tall corn is also used by bootleggers, no one was talking. Eventually, after working his way into the community by spending time sitting in an old gas station, Roberts not only found Carolina Gourdseed White corn (dating back to the late 1600s), he found someone willing to help him grow his first field. By 2000, Roberts had unearthed and documented ten varieties of antebellum corn and was selling his grits to the most famous chefs in America. *Antebellum coarse*



When Hogs Fly: A Newsom's aged country ham, delivered to your door

credit: Photograph by Peter Frank Edwards



### 3. The Crab Place Maryland Blue Crabs Crisfield, Maryland

Between their two families, Rebecca Bent and brothers Greg and Matt Cain can tally nine generations of crabbers, a number that means something when it comes to understanding the rhythms of the Chesapeake Bay. During the season (from April until late fall), the partners work with twenty local watermen, many moving into sheds along the edge of Smith Island, an hour's ferry ride from Crisfield, the southernmost town in the state (and the last inhabited island in the Chesapeake not connected to the mainland by a bridge). At about 3:00 a.m., each waterman sets his pots—all within his own territory—and then waits for the tides to change, retrieving the pots late in the afternoon. Although the demand for Maryland blue crabs is high, the waterman life will never be aqua business. In this water, crabbing remains aquaculture, still run by the timing of the moon, the crabs still manually harvested, sorted, and picked—and the partners know every single set of hands involved. *Live jumbo male blue crabs: \$67.99 for 1 dozen; [crabplace.com](http://crabplace.com); 877-328-2722*

### 4. Camellia Red Beans Harahan, Louisiana

Whether the local claim that Camellia Red Beans just cook up “creamier” is culinary superstition or common sense, no one—but no one—in NOLA gets a pot going without them. Following Hurricane Katrina, displaced residents went right to the source and called the factory office, all wondering where they could get their Camellia red beans, all hungry for home. Camellia reds are a genuine New Orleans cult cooking ingredient—and not because the beans are exotic or expensive. This standard local grocery brand is deemed essential to the iconic regional dish of red beans and rice, a stew pot that can be traced back to the city's French- and Spanish-influenced flavors and Afro-Caribbean cooking style. Traditionally made on “wash-day” Monday, the beans are placed in a pot with Sunday's ham bone and left on the back of the stove to simmer while the laundry gets done. The company is now in its fourth generation, and the founder's great-grandson Connelly Hayward figures it ships enough to make about thirty-seven million plates of red beans and rice a year. “People are fiercely loyal to Camellia red beans generation to generation. They want the beans because their mama used them.” *Red beans: \$1.99 for 1-pound bag; [cajun-shop.com](http://cajun-shop.com); 225-313-6041*

### 5. Broken Arrow Ranch Ingram, Texas

There's no other way to describe it: Michael Hughes is a wild-game visionary. Early to the table in predicting culinary trends as an artisanal purveyor of free-range venison, antelope, and wild boar meat since 1983, Hughes developed the first humane field harvesting system. Now under the supervision of his son Chris, Broken Arrow Ranch partners with ranchers in Central and South Texas to harvest wild game with minimal human intervention and maximum stress reduction. Broken Arrow's innovative field units—approved by the Texas Department of Health—are moved from location to location, designed to reduce time between harvesting and processing. Often working at night when the animals are most active, each harvest crew consists of a shooter, a skinner, a ranch representative, and a state inspector. Every effort is made to dial in shooting accuracy, with .30-caliber rifles, custom-loaded ammo, and 12-power magnification Leupold scopes. The result is truly free-ranging game meat with complex natural flavors not found in farmed animals. *Venison summer sausage: \$9.98 for 1-pound stick; [brokenarrowranch.com](http://brokenarrowranch.com); 800-962-4263*

### 6. Sweet Grass Dairy Thomasville, Georgia

When Al and Desiree Wehner sold their dairy farm in North Florida and bought land in Brooks County, Georgia, they didn't just change their lives—they changed their livestock. It was 1993, about the same time the FDA approved the dairy industry use of bovine growth hormones, and the couple wanted out of conventional dairy farming and into pasture raising, becoming American pioneers in the rotational grazing system known as the New Zealand model. Their new sturdy Jersey cows live—and feed—on grass 365 days a year. If the grass is properly raised and healthy, the animals naturally do the rest. The family practices pasture management, dividing the farm into five-acre plots and moving the animals twice a day (after each milking) so they rotate from plot to plot. Today there are three dairy farms about thirty miles apart, each run by a branch of the Wehner family, including sons Clay and Kyle (currently residing in New Zealand), along with daughter Jessica and son-in-law Jeremy Little, who are in charge of cheese making. And the taste? Sweet Grass Dairy's handcrafted Green Hill (double-cream cow's milk cheese) was

awarded first place at the American Cheese Society's 24th annual competition. *Green Hill double-cream cheese*; \$9 for 8 ounces; [sweetgrassdairy.com](http://sweetgrassdairy.com); 229-227-0752

#### **7. Benton's Country Bacon**

##### **Madisonville, Tennessee**

Allan Benton and Pig go way back. Every Thanksgiving morning, as soon as it was light enough to see, Benton's family began butchering hogs for their fresh pork dinner—a tradition so strong that Benton never ate a Thanksgiving turkey until he was a grown man. Instead, pig followed him wherever he went, even graduate school, where he learned how easy it is to attract a crowd with a simple hot plate and a skillet full of country ham. In 1973, Benton abandoned his thoughts of law school to take over a smokehouse business from neighbor AJ Hicks. Dedicating himself to perfecting the cure, Benton wrote to agricultural universities for materials and melded that research with what Hicks taught him and what he had learned as a boy. Although he still cures country ham and now even a Tennessee prosciutto, it's his bacon that made him famous. Considered by many chefs to be the best bacon in the country, the traditionally dry-cured slab that Benton turns out is hand trimmed for optimal meat-to-fat ratio, with a seriously smoky aroma that lingers in the air long after the bacon is gone. *Hickory-smoked country bacon*: \$20 for 4 pounds; [bentonshams.com](http://bentonshams.com); 423-442-5003

#### **8. Pickwick Catfish Farm**

##### **Counce, Tennessee**

"We smoked a lot of bad catfish until we learned how to use the heat we have," says Quentin Knussmann. Working with an oven he converted into a smoker, Knussmann suspends a rack of hooked catfish tail side down over heating elements scattered with hickory sawdust, a method he remembers seeing as a serviceman stationed in Alaska. "We handle the catfish just like salmon." What you get is a peppery one pounder, smoky and slightly salty. Since 1974, Quentin and his wife, Betty, have harvested catfish from their ten surrounding ponds, ranging in size from a half acre to 2.5 acres. In a good year, several hundred thousand fingerlings hatch in the spring, and as the fish mature, they are distributed to various ponds (based on size). When it's time to bring them in, it's strictly net to bucket, bucket to tank, tank to table (or smoker). In the family restaurant (located in an old fish-processing plant and open Friday through Sunday), Betty serves up fried catfish with hush puppies and coleslaw and a slice of sweet onion—Texas 1015s or Vidalias. As Pickwick's signature T-shirt brags, "Eat them where they grow them." *Smoked catfish*: \$25 for 2 whole fish; [pickwickcatfishfarm.com](http://pickwickcatfishfarm.com); 731-689-3805

#### **9. Willy Ray's Bar-B-Q**

##### **Beaumont, Texas**

Milly and Mike Dougay and Louisiana transplants to the great state of Texas. Both came from families that believed weekend afternoons were best spent cooking, and Mike is a true blood Cajun. "In 1994, we decided it was now-or-never time and sold our tamale company to open our dream restaurant, Willy Ray's Bar-B-Q. We make everything from scratch, right down to our turnip green casserole," says Milly. All Willy Ray's meat is slow cooked over red oak without a touch of gas. Like many pit masters, Mike uses an assortment of secret spice rubs to impart flavor and then places the meat on racks within a rotating wheel (like a Ferris wheel constructed from metal racks) suspended over the pit in a temperature-controlled firebox. As the wheel rotates, the cooking juices from the top tiers drip onto the lower racks. They add flavor and moisture to the cooking meat, leaving it charred but moist, tender but still textured. Look closely at the inside edge and you'll see the trace of a pinkish line called a smoke ring, an indication of a job well done. *Smoked beef brisket*: \$85 for 8 pounds; [willyraysbbq.com](http://willyraysbbq.com); 409-832-7770

#### **10. Newsom's Aged Country Ham**

##### **Princeton, Kentucky**

The Newsom kin have been curing ham since the late 1600s. First settling in coastal Virginia, the family migrated to Kentucky in the late 1700s when tobacco farming depleted the soil and the government was giving out land grants. In those days there were no federal regulations about smoking and curing; everyone did their own. But as times changed and people stopped doing for themselves, Granddaddy took over the town's grocery store and began selling country hams. Now run by third-generation granddaughter Nancy Newsom Mahaffey, the company uses a curing method passed down through a family will dating back to 1792: hand-rubbed salt-and-brown-sugar seasoning, hand washing, smoking with hickory wood, and ambient curing (instead of climate controlled), which means the curing time depends on the changeable weather. Newsom's hams, made even more famous when American culinary legend James Beard spread the word in a 1975 American Airlines magazine, are limited in number with each crop, and every whole ham has a numbered certificate to authenticate the product. *Aged country ham*: \$4.89 per

*pound (whole hams average 15–20 pounds); [newsomscountryham.com](http://newsomscountryham.com); 270-365-2482*