

## BBQ&A: Michael Stern, Road Foodie

Posted at BBQJew.com on June 2, 2010 by Porky LeSwine

Michael Stern, along with his writing partner Jane Stern, have authored more than 40 books, including the wildly popular [Roadfood](#) series. They also write a recurring column for [Gourmet](#) magazine and maintain a [lively, interactive website](#) that features restaurant write-ups, recipes, user forums and more. The two are also frequent guests on [The Splendid Table](#), which airs on National Public Radio stations across the country.

Michael's biggest career misstep to date was being kind enough to [mention BBQJew.com in a web post](#) way back in 2009. Emboldened by our good fortune, we set out to track him down for an interview. We caught up with Michael in between Roadfood travels and peppered him with questions about North Carolina barbecue.



**BBQJew: We understand that you attended Yale University as a graduate student in art. How did you make the transition from studying Picasso to eating barbecue and a whole bunch of other decidedly non-highbrow foods?**

Michael Stern: My passion was more for folk art than high art. (In fact I transferred from Yale – where I was spending way too much time studying the masters – to Columbia, where I got a degree in cinema.) Like folk art, Roadfood is not handed down from an academy on high, but grows from the grass roots up. Originality and novelty aren't nearly as important as roots and traditions. In that sense, the transition from art to food-as-folk-art was, for me, seamless. My hackles still rise when celebrity chefs try to cook ordinary people's food. It's like those opera singers in the 1960s who tried to sing Beatles songs or folk tunes to show they were hip.

**BBQJew: With a name like Stern, is it safe to assume that you are ethnically Jewish? If so, did you grow up with family members who kept kosher and do any of them still speak to you after the hundreds of cheeseburgers, oysters and barbecue plates you've ingested?**

MS: Yes, my family were of Jewish descent, but in no way religious. Growing up in a predominantly Christian community, I had no idea about kosher food until one day as a schoolboy I was invited to a friend's house for a birthday party. All the other kids got ham. I was given a hamburger. The kid's mom tried to explain kosher rules to me. I remember that when the original edition of Roadfood was published, Leo Braudy jokingly referred to it as a "guide to American trayf."

**BBQJew: What's the most egregiously "unkosher" food you've ever eaten?**

MS: I suppose you can't get less kosher than cracklin's, which are the little nuggets of pig fat (with maybe a little meat attached) that are fried until crisp. When you think about it, they are a cognate of gribenes [Editor's note: Gribenes are sort of the Jewish version of cracklings, learn more [here](#).]

**BBQJew: What do you say to people who are offended by Jews who eat treyf?**

MS: I've yet to meet such a person, but I personally am very offended by anyone who tells me what I shouldn't eat.

**BBQJew: We're surprised to hear you've yet to get hate mail about eating treyf. We are confident you'd get some if you started a website called BBQJew.com. Anyway, moving on... What were your favorite foods or food-related memories as a child?**

MS: Favorite childhood food memories: Italian beef and charcoal sausage at Chicago street food stands, corned beef sliced thin (the Chicago way), Michigan cherries in late summer, HoJo's fried clams, my mother's multi-tiered Jell-O salads, Devil's Food Squares (which seem not to be made any more, except in low-fat versions), Green Bay chili, pies from Amish Indiana.

**BBQJew: There is no pork on your list of favorite childhood food memories. When did you first taste North Carolina barbecue and what did you think of it? Has your opinion changed since then?**

MS: I first tasted NC BBQ in the early 1970s when Jane and I hit the road to write a book about long-haul truck drivers. Accustomed to the sort of barbecue you get on the South Side of Chicago, I didn't understand it. Where's the sauce? Where are the ribs or rib tips to gnaw? We subsequently visited Bob Melton's and that gave me the beginning of an appreciation, but I still was looking for fireworks. In retrospect, I realize that classic NC 'cue simply was too subtle for me. I have since come to adore the most minimally-sauced hickory-cooked pork, and my tolerance for sticky, gloppy sauces has diminished.

**BBQJew: Do you have a favorite North Carolina barbecue joint?**

MS: Favorite = Skylight Inn. Everything about it is Roadfood heaven. Although I'd never kick Stamey's, Allen & Son, Bill Spoon's or Bridges BBQ Lodge off the plate.

**BBQJew: What appeals to you about BBQ in general and NC 'cue in particular?**

MS: I love that it's messy and rough-cooked, but it winds up being the most elegant-tasting food there is (true especially of NC BBQ). Barbecue's textures are so beguiling. I like how informal it necessarily is (no one worries about what wine to serve with it) and I especially like how it is a part of the fabric of people's lives, culture, history and identity. That last reason is why I'm not very interested in barbecue outside its natural habitat, even if it tastes good (usually, it does not). Detached from its roots, most food is immaterial to me.

**BBQJew: Amen to your last answer. Interestingly, North Carolina barbecue is not nearly as widespread across the U.S. as dishes like Texas brisket or Memphis ribs. How often do you come across NC barbecue outside of the state?**

MS: There's a place near my house, in Brewster, NY, that purports to serve North Carolina style pulled pork. It is not. Nowhere near, even though the owners hail from North Carolina. I surmise that they have gooped it up to please northerners, for whom sauce is essential. I think the classic eastern and central NC BBQ will never get hugely popular elsewhere because it doesn't have the easily recognizable pizzazz of saucier kinds, nor the machismo of Texas stuff. It's too refined to enjoy the popularity of, say, Buffalo wings.

**BBQJew: As you plan your Roadfood trips, how do you choose the places you travel and the restaurants you visit?**

MS: There is no logic whatsoever about the planning of where we are going to go. Sometimes we get assignments from magazines, or we might have a speaking engagement in a place that demands

Roadfood research; but otherwise, we just go where tipsters tell us to go ... or where we hunger for the most ... or where we feel guilty about not having been recently enough.

**BBQJew: Speaking of Roadfood research, we're sure you are aware that North Carolinians make a big deal about the divide between Western/Lexington-style pork shoulder barbecue and Eastern-style whole hog barbecue. As an outsider, what do you think of this feud?**

MS: The feud, like chili feuds, is silly. It's strange that most pitmasters I have met are quiet, meditative people, very serene, and yet barbecue attracts more than its share of loudmouth blowhards (think of barbecue competitions!) who want to feud about rights and wrongs. Personally, I love both styles, but I am more smitten by the textural variety of whole hog.

**BBQJew: Our final question is clichéd but we are curious to know your answer. It's your last day on earth (well, hopefully not, but you never know)--where do you eat your last meal and what do you order?**

MS: Last meal. That's an easy one. I would go to Outback and order a Blooming Onion. After eating it, I would welcome death.

**BBQJew: Well put, Michael, thanks for the laugh. Oh, and we'll be in touch as soon as the Outback Steakhouse attorneys contact us.**