

BBQ&A: Thomas Morris (aka Another_Q_Lover), BBQ Eater, Judge, Reviewer & Cooker

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I met Thomas Morris, aka Another_Q_Lover, at the Twin City RibFest in Winston-Salem this past summer. As we waited to judge the rib cooking competition, Morris agreed to sit down (well, he was sitting down already so that part didn't take much convincing) and answer some of my disjointed questions. We talked about his decades of experience eating, cooking, writing about and most recently judging North Carolina barbecue. Morris is originally from Ohio but since moving to the Tar Heel state 30 years ago he's ingested enough pork to have more than earned his state citizenship and, for what little it's worth, my respect (he has been eating NC barbecue longer than I have, after all). Without further ado, here's Another_Q...

BBQJew: How long have you been reviewing barbecue restaurants and how long have you been eating North Carolina barbecue?

Another_Q_Lover: I grew up in southwestern Ohio and a barbecue sandwich up there is a Sloppy Joe down here. When I moved down here in 1980, I started sampling some barbecue. I think Wilbur's was the first place and I wasn't too crazy about it. But then I went to a pig pickin' and it started growing on me. I got real serious about it the last 10, 12, maybe 15 years.

BBQJew: Is that when you started writing reviews? Did you write the reviews knowing you were going to share them with others or as notes for yourself?

AQL: Yeah, initially as notes for myself, and then the intention was to put it up on an interactive website. Now that's kind of been overcome, it's probably going to be going straight into a book. The judging part, I started doing that by taking a KCBS class up in Ohio in March and since then I've judged three competitions including this one. [Editor's note: Another_Q has judged a bunch more competitions since this interview.] It's fun, it's interesting to see different styles, different flavors, some really good stuff and some really bad stuff.

BBQJew: Tell me about the judging class you went to: you said it was in Ohio but run by the Kansas City Barbecue Society (KCBS)? What was it like and what did they run you through?

AQL: I went to Ohio because they didn't have a class in North Carolina this year, so I went to

visit my mother in my home state. It's a five-hour class where they teach you how to judge and then actually provide you with three samples of everything. Everything includes chicken, pulled pork, pork ribs and beef brisket. If you judge a KCBS sanctioned event you're going to eat all four of those meats. The good thing is they will have one judge per cooking tent, with a maximum of 6 judges per table. So you will judge 6 cooking teams and that's it. Six times the four meats is a gracious plenty.



[Inset photo: LeSwine (L) & Morris (R) judging ribs - it's than harder it looks!]

BBQJew: Have you seen any judges run out of steam toward the end who were trying to eat the meat off the bone?

AQL: Not yet but I have seen some who were not really looking forward to the next plate getting put down in front of them. They warn you about that when you are learning to judge. KCBS sponsors five or six competitions in North Carolina, but tons out in the

Midwest. Memphis Barbeque Network sponsors two or three in NC but most of them are in the Tennessee area. The NC Pork Council sponsors most of the competitions in NC, maybe 15-20 a year. And then once in awhile you'll find one sponsored by the NC Barbecue Society. I've not taken their classes yet but I am a member. I got certified by KCBS and the NC Pork Council, and plan to get certified by MBN too.

BBQJew: And you told me you work with the National Guard travelling across the state. Is that how you got into trying barbecue?

AQL: No, I got into it before I got the job. I've been working with the National Guard for ten years and was working with the Marine Corps before that down in Camp Lejeune.

BBQJew: Since you've spent time down east and in the Piedmont part of the state, I wonder if you have a theory as to why they cook with wood more in the Piedmont? I've heard about 10 different theories and I'm not sure I believe any of them.

AQL: What I've heard and I'm not saying I buy into this theory is that there is less wood in the eastern part of the state.

BBQJew: I tend to be a fundamentalist about wood cooking. Are you like that or a little more flexible than I am?

AQL: The big debate between propane and no propane—I say as long as you can get the smoke flavor, like a lot of cookers who are going to using a smoker box on the side, it's okay. I like the

smoked flavor but it's not an absolute necessity. With the NC Pork Council cook-offs, you won't find much wood-cooked BBQ.

[Editor's note: Porky LeSwine got visibly uncomfortable at the previous statement and interrupted the interviewee to change to a less heretical subject]

BBQJew: What's on your list of places you want to go to but haven't visited yet.

AQL: As far as restaurants go, there are still three on the NC Barbecue Society trail [editor's note: this trail only lists traditional wood cookers!] that I haven't been to: Fuzzy's in Madison, Richard's in Salisbury and M&K in Granite Quarry. I've been to all the others on the trail, I've been to all but two of the ones Kent Craig reviewed on his website.

BBQJew: How often do you agree with the reviewers? I know Craig and I have some very different opinions, for example.

AQL: Right. Between all the reviews I've read—Bob Garner's, Jim Early's, Holy Smoke—I'm probably on track about 60% to 70% of the time, other times I like something they don't like or they like something I don't like. I cook barbecue too. My father-in-law has a propane pig cooker and we mostly do fundraising events for the church. We also have a small catering business and do a couple pigs a year.

BBQJew: How would you rate your own cooking?

AQL: Well, my father-in-law's barbecue is the best I've ever eaten. Really. My book of review is on a one to five scale and he is the only one who has ever gotten a five. He used to think I just said that because he's my father-in-law until I got certified as a judge and now he's starting to believe that his stuff is pretty good. He has a little more faith in my word now.

BBQJew: Have the two of you ever thought about entering competitions?

AQL: Yeah. We've thought about it and eventually you'll see the Four Little Pigs barbecue team at some competitions. My wife and mother-in-law want to get involved but right now they work on Saturdays and so it's difficult. But we're planning on taking a cooking class sponsored by KCBS.

BBQJew: About the book: when did you start thinking about putting your reviews in a book?

AQL: Once I started going out and reviewing places and my wife's cousin convinced me to keep track of my visits and make a website out of it [AQL posts his reviews to NCBBQ.com]. That was about six or seven years ago. Once I did that then it was like, yeah, I'll keep track of them for a website but I'm not a tech-savvy guy. So I figured I'd eventually turn it into a book. I am still collecting more reviews; there are so many restaurants out there that need to be looked at before my book is ready.

BBQJew: About the book, are you out there looking for a publisher or will you self-publish or what?

AQL: I wasn't thinking that far ahead until last week. Last weekend two of the other judges

talked to me about it. One of them told me about a self-publishing website and the other one, a well-known judge, told me that he is a publisher and wants me to send him a copy of my book.

BBQJew: Thanks for sitting down with me, or at least not standing up when I sat down next to you.