

City, in a vain attempt to get a look at the legendary pit. (Mr. Bryant saw through the ruse immediately, Mr. Pearson recalled, but granted him a one-minute audience anyway). The style he eventually developed, and brought to Queens in 1992, is even more spare than that of Texas barbecue purists.

Mr. Pearson puts absolutely no seasoning on his whole briskets before putting them in the pit. His recipe — if you can call it that — calls for just the 14-pound slabs and smoke: no rub, no sauce, not even salt. The resulting meat, in addition to being outrageously flavorful and juicy, boasts a clear red smoke ring around the edges of each slice. The smoke ring is a universally recognized sign of real barbecue, though Mr. Pearson says ruefully that New Yorkers sometimes mistake it for excess barbecue sauce or underdone beef.

Mr. Pearson will soon be opening up shop on East 81st Street. In 1998, he closed his original and still-mourned Long Island City location, on 51st Street, with its back garden and prowling cats, and moved his pit to a Jackson Heights sports bar. (That location will remain open.) The Long Island City lot was taken over by Philly's Smoke House, a multilevel barbecue palace that smokes over wood.

In an attempt to forestall complaints from neighbors (the new location is in the heart of the Upper East Side, just a few blocks from Junior League headquarters), Mr. Aretsky has fitted Pearson's roof with a \$36,000 electrostatic precipitator that filters out the smoke, vapors and grease that are inevitably exhaled by a barbecue pit. But he will be working the same no-frills pit, shipped from Mesquite, Tex., that he has always used.

"People ask to see the pit," he said. "And then they're surprised when it's not a big hole in the ground."

These days, a barbecue pit — even in barbecue country — is most likely an above-ground brick oven encased in steel, about the size of a refrigerator. According to Mr. Pearson, the art and craft of the pit master takes place not in the cabinet (where the meat revolves endlessly on racks) but in the pit's separate, tiny firebox.

In the firebox, hickory logs burn all day, every day, giving off a controlled, intense heat and, surprisingly, almost no smoke. Mr. Pearson said the goal is actually to

ing the palate he developed in those haute kitchens, Mr. Lang slathers his meat with thick spice pastes and complex sauces. He ranges through all regional barbecue styles and heads beyond, into pineapple, ginger and any other ingredient that helps him achieve the explosive blend of spicy, sweet, tart and salty that is barbecue's flavor signature. He home-brews four completely different barbecue sauces, chops up his beef brisket and bathes it in yet another sauce, and makes a mustardy dressing to coat shreds of pulled pork, the Carolina classic. The barbecue itself is good, but it is the punch of the sauces that comes screaming at you across the metal counter, which Mr. Lang said he modeled on the one at Gray's Papaya.

"I hate restaurants," Mr. Lang said last week, about his transition from the likes of Daniel to a no-frills, no-seats barbecue joint on a barren stretch of 11th Avenue. "Great barbecue is just as good or better than anything you eat in a restaurant," he continued. "Besides, these are exactly the same sweet potatoes they serve at Le Cirque." Mr. Lang's side dishes, as might be expected, far outpace those of Mr. Pearson, who eschews barbecue sauce and grudgingly serves coleslaw only in response to customer demand.

Blue Smoke, having spent its early childhood trying to be all barbecue to all New Yorkers, has had time to perfect its side dishes in the meantime (the baked beans with chopped burnt ends, crusty edges of barbecued pork, are exemplary). The original flaw in

the Blue Smoke pit, a 15-story chimney that sucked out all the heat, smoke and humidity, has been adjusted. And Mr. Callaghan, sounding war-weary, said he hopes the slashing criticisms leveled by local barbecue fans when the restaurant opened are now permanently behind him. The barbecue is worthy, and occasionally even spectacular.

Why do New Yorkers care so much about barbecue? Mr. Richter of Big Island Barbecue says that barbecue is simply addictive, no matter where you're from. Other New York aficionados cited spicy pastrami, smoked salmon and the glazed spareribs at old-fashioned Chinese restaurants as seminal barbecue experiences. For many Jewish New Yorkers, a weakness for slow-cooked brisket is already a given.

Even as word gets out about the new pits, the nagging question of authenticity will continue to dog New York's pit masters. Will local barbecue be able to stand up to the real thing? Robb Walsh, the restaurant critic for the Houston Press and author of the definitive "Legends of Texas Barbecue Cook Book," said, "Let me put the question in New York terms: If you filtered Houston city water so it was the same as New York tap, and used the same flour, and brought in the same ovens, could you make authentic New York bagels in Texas? Yes, and no."



WHERE SMOKING IS REQUIRED Adam Perry Lang, top, the owner of Daisy May's BBQ USA.

produce as little smoke as possible. "There will always be some smoke," he said, "and that's enough to flavor the meat. But the less smoke you can see, the better the barbecue." In an efficient pit, he continued, you can cook 700 pounds of meat for 14 hours using only seven logs.

Green, or moist, wood is the key to a fire that burns low and slow. "You can't throw a couple of dry pine two-by-fours on a fire and expect to cook barbecue," said Chris O'Neil, the executive chef at Virgil's. He said that in the winter, when fresh wood is scarce, some pit masters resort to soaking split logs in pickle juice and apple juice to moisten them.

Mr. Lang, who came to barbecue via his Long Island childhood and the kitchens of Le Cirque and Daniel, has already learned enough about the competitive side of barbecue to keep quiet about his methods. "Part of barbecue's appeal is all the secrets and mystique," he said. Mr. Lang's pit, operated with a computer keypad, looks more like an oversize cellphone than a barbecue pit. But except for his automated humidity controls — the absolute latest in barbecue technology — the cooking principle is the same as Mr. Pearson's: wood smoke and heat, steadily applied to large pieces of meat.

But Mr. Lang's end product could hardly be more different from Mr. Pearson's. Us-