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A love letter to North Carolina's Red Bridges Barbecue Lodge

By Monique Truong, Published: November 30

Dear [Red Bridges Barbecue Lodge](#),

It's been 10 years since I last ate at your fine establishment, but I can still see the teal blue vinyl that covers your booths and chairs. It's a shade of blue that belongs to a different era, which is appropriate, as so do you. And of course, I can smell the hickory smoke and the sharp jabs of vinegar that accompany every tray that emerges from your kitchen.

It was October 2002, and my husband and I were in your home town of Shelby, N.C. — my first trip back there in decades and his first ever — for the wedding of our friends Sean and Kristin. Kristin is a local girl whose parents still live in Shelby. Sean grew up in Connecticut, the same state my husband is from. My husband and I joked that their marriage, like ours, would be a mixed marriage: a Northern boy and a Southern girl, of course.

Back in Brooklyn, where we all lived and still do, Kristin and I had been amazed at and laughed over the fact that I had grown up in neighboring Boiling Springs, and that my parents were both graduates of Gardner-Webb, a Baptist college that is now a university, located in the sleeping heart of that little town. "Town" is perhaps too expansive a word for Boiling Springs. I once called it a "freckle" in an essay. It was the most neutral-sounding, diminutive word I could think of for it. My relationship to Boiling Springs is complicated, but so is my relationship to you and, therefore, the writing of this letter.

Over the course of that long weekend, my husband and I ate at your establishment three times, and that's really saying something given the packed schedule of meals, receptions and parties that Kristin and her family had arranged for us out-of-town wedding guests. My husband and I attended them all but also made time in our day and room in our stomachs for your Jumbo Plate: pork shoulder, fork-tender from its overnight sojourn on the pit. In the vernacular of your menu, I ordered mine "chopped" with a mix of "white and brown" meat. I didn't know about the "crunchy brown" option back then, which would have added crispy, fat-rendered bits of skin to the mix. I knew enough, though, to order extra sauce.

As you know, yours is North Carolina Piedmont-style barbecue sauce at its finest. If you'll forgive me while I slip into the language of food writers (we too have a vernacular of our own), Bridges, your sauce has a top note, a middle and a base. What Italian perfumers call the testa, corpo and fondo. The top is, of course, the vinegar. It's there to invigorate the taste buds; slap them to attention, if you will. The middle note is undoubtedly tomato, either ketchup or paste. It's a velveteen, light touch, a make-up kiss after the physicality

of the vinegar. The base note is the reassuring warmth of spices easily found in any American kitchen. Nonetheless, it's your secret, which I've tried to uncover in my own kitchen many times since. I've a deep appreciation for the elusive, a profound respect for flavors that play hide-and-seek with my tongue. I've tried sweet paprika, black pepper, a bit of brown sugar, a wink of cayenne. I've come close but have never matched it. The obvious conclusion, of course, is that your sauce — any barbecue sauce worth licking off your fingers, in fact — does not sing alone. Sauce needs its pig. And there's no way I would try to conjure up your pit-cooked pig in Brooklyn. I'm persistent, but I'm no fool.

But you already know all this about yourself. I suppose I just wanted you to know that I know it as well. It's important to me that you understand how the taste of your barbecue had made me feel right at home, had comforted me in a way that took me by surprise, and had asked me, just like a childhood friend would: Why have you been away for so long?

Can you imagine all that communicated via a plate of barbecue? Okay, three Jumbo Plates of barbecue.

I wrote earlier that my relationship to you is complicated, and you must have asked yourself: But how could that be? You're a restaurant — a local institution, really — sitting proudly at your present location on East Dixon Boulevard since 1953; and I'm a customer, like many others, a patron in search of pork enrobed in smoke and sauce. What could be so fraught about that transaction?

In our case, I think the answer lies in the concept of belonging, which is often expressed as “the sense of belonging.” Like the five senses we are born with, the sense of belonging defines the way we experience the world. It demarcates the borders of our known world. “Belonging” is a meaty word, full of meanings, and yet as elusive as the base note of your sauce.

My parents and I lived in Boiling Springs from 1975 to 1978, and yet you and I didn't meet until October 2002. There are two mysteries here: (1) How was it possible that during those years, my family never once drove the 15 minutes from Boiling Springs to Shelby, parked our silver Chevrolet Nova in your parking lot and gazed up at your neon sign with the word “barbecue” written out in loopy lower case letters, except for the middle “B,” which was a tall, outsize capital, which drew the eye even further upward, like a church steeple? (2) If I had never dined with you before, why did your barbecue taste to me of home, the way dogwoods in bloom or the scent of honeysuckles at dusk always make me think of my childhood in the South?

We've met now, but maybe it's time for me to introduce myself properly. I tell the story of how my parents and I came to Boiling Springs in different ways. There are many places to begin our story, but let's begin this time with our names:

In the summer of 1975, when I was 7 years old, my parents and I began using our baptismal names: Charles, Angela and Monique. Vietnamese Catholics all have additional French names chosen from the roster of saints. The names were required by the church but rarely used in our day-to-day life in South Vietnam. Charles, Angela and Monique, however, were no longer in Vietnam. In April of '75, we had lost our country after a protracted civil war, escaped as refugees and had been living in limbo on U.S. military bases repurposed as and renamed “relocation camps.”

We were not homeless anymore, though. We had been sponsored by an American family whose home, and thus our home for the next several years, was the small town of Boiling Springs, which as you know is located in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, toward the western tip of North Carolina. We needed

easy-to-pronounce names for this new and unexpected geography. I think that the switching of names was also an act of magical thinking, or perhaps faith. All acts of renaming are about transformation, and all transformation requires faith: in our case, the faith that we would blend in better and be less conspicuous with these Western monikers. “Charles” and “Angela” had the best hope of that; I’m sorry to say that “Monique” remained hopelessly foreign-sounding.

In 1975, Boiling Springs had a Baptist college but little else. A short drive away was Shelby, whose signs proudly proclaimed it “The City of Pleasant Living” and the seat of Cleveland County. Shelby was where we attended our churches (for a while, we alternated between a Catholic and a Baptist church because Charles and Angela didn’t want to offend either congregation, which had both so kindly welcomed us with donated food, clothing and an exuberant niceness that I would later learn had a name: Southern hospitality). Shelby was also where we went to buy our groceries and shop for the odds and ends of our new life.

After our first year in the Boiling Springs-Shelby area, my father went to Boston to study for his MBA. My mother was a nursing student at Gardner-Webb, and I was in Boiling Springs Elementary getting the spirit kicked out of me every day. At first I thought my classmates were simply confused by my country of origin, but I soon realized that “Chink” and “Jap” had little to do with China and Japan. They were words meant to wound me, not to identify me. My mother and I sought solace, distraction and entertainment in our occasional meals out. There wasn’t much else that a 33-year-old Vietnamese woman and her 8-year-old daughter could do together.

When we headed for Shelby, we gravitated toward the fast-food chains with the commercials and jingles that were familiar to us from television. To this day, I’ve never met another person who savors an Arby’s roast beef sandwich the way my mother did. She even liked that neon yellow cheese sauce that coated your teeth like glue. Angela was on a tight budget, so we also found ourselves at the all-you-can-eat night at Pizza Inn, an outpost of the national pizzeria franchise, jockeying for position with young men with large appetites.

Angela knew a bargain when she saw one, and the combination of the all-you-can-eat pizzas with that American thing of wonder known as the “unlimited salad bar” was irresistible to her. In Vietnam, Angela had been a lady of leisure. Her parochial school education had taught her fluent French and English, and she had traveled to Europe and returned home with suitcases full of French lingerie and other nonessentials. In Shelby, she was a woman in search of a bargain, in search of American food on a plastic tray or in a paper bag. What Angela was also looking for, perhaps, was the kind of anonymity that these nondescript restaurants offered the two of us. Often located near the highway, these places didn’t serve anything besides food, fast and cheap. There was no conversation, no community, no shared history and no sense of belonging. In that void, there existed instead a kind of parity among the customers. No conversation, community, history nor belonging meant that no one was included, and no one was excluded.

Now, Bridges, I’m not suggesting that back in the mid-’70s you wouldn’t have welcomed us with a smile and the small slip of paper that you call a menu. What I am suggesting is that we feared that you wouldn’t, or maybe that some of your patrons wouldn’t, and I stand by that fear, because you know that the children whom I went to school with in Boiling Springs weren’t born with those ugly racial epithets in their mouths. Someone put them there, and those someones were most likely the adults in their lives. Maybe even some of your best and most loyal customers.

Southern hospitality, my mother and I had learned, had its flip side, and we did what we could to avoid running headlong into it. This protective instinct made Boiling Springs and Shelby even smaller for us. One of the consequences of our proscribed world was that we never had the pleasure of enjoying a Bridges Jumbo

Plate together. It would have been a splurge for Angela, but one that I know she would have found addictive. I can assure you that my mother and I would certainly have joined the ranks of your best and most loyal customers.

Vietnamese people honor the pig. In fact, we honor one another by bestowing a pig. A wedding engagement, for instance, is not complete until the groom's family brings a whole roasted pig to the house of the bride's family. My Connecticut-born husband and his family did not fulfill this obligation. This is why, when I'm feeling ornery and wicked, I tell him that our marriage is technically null and void. No pig, no marriage.

Now for the second mystery: the homecoming that the taste of your barbecue bestowed upon me. Some may argue, and I hope you won't, Bridges, that my family and I didn't live in Boiling Springs long enough to make it our home nor to make me a Southerner. But 1975 to 1978 were years that formed me. These were the years when I acquired a new language, the third of my young life. English is now the only language in which I can claim fluency. In Vietnamese and French, I'm at best a writer of haikus or of unintentionally experimental, disjointed prose. In English, I'm a novelist.

The Belgian-born French novelist Marguerite Yourcenar once wrote that "the true birthplace is . . . [where] for the first time one looks intelligently upon oneself. My first homelands have been books, and to a lesser degree schools." Yourcenar is right that for some of us, the word "homeland" isn't singular but plural. She's also right about the critical self-recognition that books can allow us to experience. How else can I explain the homecoming that I've felt on the pages of novels by Harper Lee, Carson McCullers and William Faulkner? I think there's a connection between how these books and how your barbecue seem like longtime friends to me. Yes, Bridges, I just compared you to Lee, McCullers and Faulkner. You're very welcome.

The words "homeland" and "home" can refer to a place that may be on a map but does not necessarily exist yet within your heart; a place you have to learn, slowly and with trepidation, to claim because you're afraid that it never claimed you; a place that lies dormant within you, like a seed or a song, waiting. Waiting for words like these to wake it up: "I could smell the curves of the river beyond the dusk and I saw the last light supine and tranquil . . ." (Faulkner, "[The Sound and the Fury](#)"). Or waiting for the alchemy that occurs when patience, heat and smoke coax forth every ounce of flavor that a slab of pork has to give.

Bridges, I'm a writer and I'm food-obsessed, so it makes perfect sense to me that homelands — whether dormant or active — can be found in books and in flavors. So much so that I wrote my second novel, "[Bitter in the Mouth](#)," about a young girl who has a neurological condition that causes her to experience the sensation of taste when she hears or speaks certain words. Her name is Linda Hammerick, and she's from the Tar Heel State.

Bridges, I hope you don't mind, but you have a cameo — actually several cameos — in my second novel. I took some liberties: I shortened your name a bit; I referred to your barbecue as "pulled" pork, as opposed to "chopped;" I added perhaps a couple more pigs to your neon sign; and I renamed myself Linda Hammerick and imagined a different life and family for her in Boiling Springs. But otherwise it's a story about tasting and claiming a home in the American South.

I hope you'll like it as much as I liked you.

Yours truly,

Monique

details

Red Bridges Barbecue Lodge

2000 East Dixon Blvd.

Shelby, N.C.

704-482-8567

www.bridgesbbq.com

Wednesday-Sunday, 11 a.m to 8 p.m. (because the barbecue is cooked fresh every day, they occasionally run out early). Jumbo Plate (barbecue, slaw, baked beans, French fries, hush puppies or buns), \$10.50.

Truong is the author of two novels, “The Book of Salt” and “Bitter in the Mouth.”

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