

BARBEQUE

IS IN HIS BLOOD

This pit boss cooks Texas-style 'que in a big way

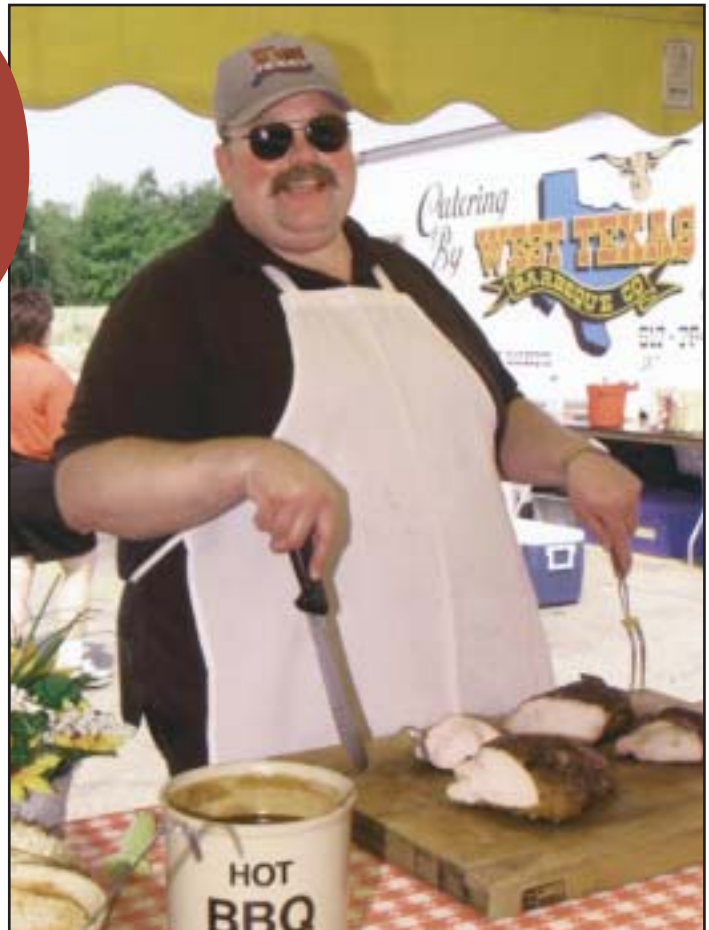
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By Kate Lawson / Detroit News Food Writer

Jackson, Mich. – If you're a fan of barbeque, you'll want to know about Dan ("the Big'Un") Huntoon of Jackson, because without a doubt Huntoon makes the best Texas barbequed brisket this side of the Rio Grande. Actually, Huntoon has a couple of nicknames, and he comes by both honestly. "Big'Un" was bestowed upon him by a guy named Ernest Decker down in Roanoke, Texas, as a friendly commentary on Huntoon's size. But it's the second handle that Huntoon wears even better – "Barbeque Man."

And by barbeque we don't mean slapping some meat on a grill and calling it "que." True barbeque, according to Steven Raichlen in *How to Grill* (Workman \$19.95), as practiced in Texas and the American South is a low-heat, indirect method that uses lots of wood smoke to cook and flavor the food. And that's what the Big'Un is talking' about – "pit" barbeque that's cooked over a slow burning hardwood fire.

This isn't about chuck roast covered in ketchup says



Dan Huntoon carves pit-smoked beef brisket, as well as turkey breast and pork loin, with sauce on the side.

Huntoon. "It's about brisket, a cut that comes from the breast of beef just behind the foreleg. It's 12 to 14 pounds of beef that takes 20 hours to cook, and what happens between brisket and barbeque is almost magical." And that's exactly what happens when Huntoon prepares it.

But getting a bite of Barbeque Man's brisket is not easy. Huntoon runs his own catering company, West Texas Barbeque Co., located in a yellow block building on Brooklyn Road in Jackson, and if you figure on stopping in for a brisket sandwich and a side of beans, forget it.

Huntoon's specialty is serving crowds, big crowds. He caters company picnics, business open houses, employee luncheons, wedding receptions; whatever the event, you name it and he's probably catered it.

West Texas does offer a pick-up catering service for

as few as 25 people, but for the real deal, you'll need a few more guests. If you are planning on at least 150 guests, Huntoon will bring a full crew and one of his giant Texas barbecue pits right to your event site.

Learning to 'que

Huntoon may hail from Jackson, but he got his barbecue degree in Roanoke, Texas, as a ranch hand on Jay Rodgers' dude ranch, Ranchland. After learning the tricks of the brisket trade from the "Denton County boys," Huntoon returned home to Jackson to enlighten us poor Yankees.

Huntoon laughs when he recalls the comments from folks. "They ask me all kinds of questions, like do I marinate the meat first? I ask them, "What in? A swimming pool?"

Making barbecue can be a messy operation. Anyone who's ever visited a barbecue joint knows they're not called "grease houses" for nothing. One of Huntoon's favorites, Kreuz Market in Lockart, Texas, serves its beef, sausage or pork on brown butcher paper. No side dishes here. But you can enjoy a piece of cheddar cheese, chunk of onion, fresh tomatoes and avocado. "There's a bunch of mismatched chairs, old tables and a huge exhaust fan at one end to suck out the smoke," says the Big'Un.

At Huntoon's place in Jackson, however, you'd be hard-pressed to find grease. The pits are cleaned regularly, and even the dogs, Buster and Buddy, have to fight for scraps that fall to the slab under the pits.

In fact, this reporter got her dates crossed and showed up a week early to discover a gleaming, pristine setting where cords of wood are stacked neatly out front and even the welding shop where Huntoon makes adjustments to his pits is so spotless you could eat off the floor. The storage closet is neatly arranged, catering uniforms pressed and ready, and Huntoon's office



Huntoon, aka "Barbecue Man" and Kim Lasky of West Texas Barbecue Co. serve employees of Key Plastics in Plymouth.

supplies are lined up like toy soldiers behind his desk. This is a man who even does neat in a big way.

Primitive Beginnings

When Huntoon returned from Texas in the early '80s, he tried a couple of different business ventures, but barbecue was in his blood. "I built my first pit in my dad's garage," Huntoon says. "My dad pulled in the driveway, got a look at what I was doing in the garage, shook his head, and told me I was crazy."

In 1986, Huntoon hauled out his newly built pit and some 300 pounds of brisket and started selling sandwiches on the corner of Francis and High streets in downtown Jackson. "I had a lot of \$1,000 Saturdays," says Huntoon. "Barbecue doesn't pay in Texas because it's all over the place, but up here, folks are crying for it."

Huntoon doesn't have to sell barbecue on the street corner anymore. In fact, he's gotten so good at bringing barbecue to the masses that last October he served barbecue and all the trimmings, including beans, salads and dessert, to 5,000 people at a University of Michigan Medical Center event. "We got 'em served in 3 1/2 hours," Huntoon boasts.

For larger events, Huntoon hauls his handmade pits to the location, loaded down with smoked brisket, pork

and turkey and sometimes some smoked sausage or even prime rib. The largest pit is 6 feet wide, 5 feet tall and 12 feet long and can cook 3,000 pounds of brisket at a time.

At a recent employee appreciation luncheon for Key Plastics in Plymouth, Michigan. Huntoon and his crack-catering crew (Cary Willoughby, Laura Henry, Tim



Dan Huntoon unloads another tray of brisket from his special handmade pit designed to smoke up to 3,000 pounds of meat at once.

An old Texas cowboy said it best, “good barbeque is cooked the same way that a cowboy dances - slow, easy and often,” muses the Big’Un. “It’s as tender as a lady’s heart, as moist as her... goodnight kiss and as lean as a cowboy’s wallet.”

VanderMolen, Patrick “Fitz” Fitzpatrick, Cindi Noppe, Pam Weiss, Jessica Gallt and Kim Lasky all of Jackson) served up 375 pounds of brisket, 90 pounds each of turkey breast and pork loin, 140 pounds of baked beans, 130 pounds of potato salad, 130 pounds of pasta salad and enough chocolate fudge brownies to serve 500 people. They started serving food at 10:30 a.m., and by noon the crew was cleaning and packing up to leave.

This is the sixth year Huntoon’s been asked to cater

the luncheon, and management and employees alike couldn’t be happier. “What he (Huntoon) does is incredible.” Says Art Autio, engineering manager at Key Plastics. “I had it last year, and it’s amazing.” Tim Nelson, president of operations at Key was already talking about Huntoon coming next year. “You need to get with Peggy (Piontek, the executive assistant) about a date,” he says heading back to the ‘que line for seconds.

These days, with company picnics, weddings and parties in full swing, the ‘Barbeque Man’ finds himself working “Monday through Monday” and going full throttle. Before an event, he’s working the pit, making sure the fire stays stoked, so the meat gets smoked. Sleep is not a summertime activity for the big man.

“This is what I love about this job though.” Huntoon says as he stirs the embers still glowing from the night before, while his dogs go bounding about the parking lot roughhousing and biting at each other’s ears. “It’s this part, the cooking, the fire. It’s primitive and I like that.”

Huntoon adds some logs to the pit and the smell of woodsmoke permeates the air. “What I do is an art. It takes patience, understanding and a slow-burning hardwood fire,” Huntoon explains.

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as moist as her . . . goodnight kiss and as lean as a cowboy’s wallet.”

Huntoon is proud of his ability to efficiently bring great barbeque to the masses, but what he really wants is a nice little spread somewhere near Chelsea where he can open a real Texas barbeque joint. That way, he figures he’ll be closer to Ann Arbor and even Metro Detroiters won’t find it too long a haul to go for some great barbeque. “The idea is to keep it simple . . . it won’t

be big and it won't be fancy. It'll be modeled after some of my favorite barbeque joints in Texas. Places like Angelo's in Fort Worth and Louie Mueller's in Taylor" he says. "You'll be able to get a barbeque sandwich or a plate of ribs and we'll have all the traditional sides too."

"Texas may be ground zero when it comes to barbeque, but I'm doing everything I can to bring that to Michigan," Huntoon says. "Anyone got 20 acres they want to sell in Chelsea?"

About Barbeque

The most famous kinds of barbeque are Texas-style and Southern-style. What's the difference?" According to Dan Huntoon of West Texas Barbeque Co. in Jackson, in Texas it's mostly about beef, as in beef brisket, and about pits (not smokers). Beef brisket is made up of two pieces of meat separated by a seam of fat, and it's the fat that bastes the brisket during its long, slow cooking. One way to positively identify real pit barbeque is by the smoke ring – a dark pink ring that forms on the outside edges of the meat.

Unlike Southern-style barbeque that's basted with a sauce while it cooks, Texas-style barbeque is seasoned



Becky Humphrey and Dan Huntoon

with a rub before cooking and rarely sauced.

"Good barbeque doesn't need sauce, and lots of Texans are suspicious of meat served with sauce already on it." Says Huntoon, whose advice is to keep it simple. "I use a rub that's pretty basic – seasoned salt, black pepper, cayenne, granulated garlic and paprika. Granulated garlic is not to be confused with garlic salt or garlic powder, and you can find it in most spice aisles of any supermarket."

— *Kate Lawson*

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To reach 'Barbeque Man'

West Texas Barbeque Co. in Jackson caters on-site events for 150 or more guests. You can also order pick-up service for as few as 25 people, also all of their delicious pit cooked meats are available throughout the holidays. **Call Dan Huntoon at (517) 784-0510.**