

he shrugs, a little embarrassed.

The injected and rubbed shoulders are cured in the fridge for 24 hours. Then around 7-8 in the morning, he'll fire up "The Beast." Actually he'll build the fire in a drum with natural charcoal and then throw on hickory logs until they char. The hickory comes from a local lumber company, already cut into firewood-size split logs. They go through 50 cords a year, "maybe more."

He shovels the smoking charred hickory logs into the firebox of "The Beast." Designed by his brother-in-law, Jim Kush, from a paper napkin drawing that Craig handed him, "The Beast" can cook and smoke 48 shoulders or 108 racks of ribs over a 10-hour period. Using an ingenious damper system, it actually acts as its own convection oven, the counterclockwise rotating racks serving as their own fan that draws smoke and 225-degree air over, under and around the meat. During the cooking process, the fat and juice falls to the bottom and is stored in a 1,000-pound vat so that Valley Proteins can haul it away "to make soap."

When the meat is done 10 hours later, they chop it up. Sometimes "The Beast" runs six days a week. "It's a lot of meat," says Hartman. And that's not counting the other stuff they cook. "We're doing a lot of brisket, a lot of pulled chicken, a lot of half chickens, a lot of ribs and a lot of pork belly."

Have you ever wondered why the fast food franchises have not yet jumped onto this barbecue thing? At first glance, it's a no brainer: a McBarbeque, or a 'QueKing, or a Wendy-Qs. But Hartman cautions it's not as simple as slapping frozen



Brandon Ness gets ready for another crazy day in the kitchen at Barbeque Exchange. Owner Craig Hartman thought originally he would need only five employees. Currently he has 20 working for him.



Craig Hartman hoped some day there would be a line at Barbeque Exchange. There's a line every day, but it always moves fast.

patties onto a grill. "Pork is different for barbeque. If you're going to smoke, the smokers have to be right, they have to be high-output...It's a lot of labor."

Making good 'que is also "a dirty job. We're steady sweeping up ash." Actually, it is surprisingly odor and fly free around here, but there's no escaping the heat. Craig Hartman doesn't seem to mind; he's not trapped in a kitchen all day. From

the relative peace and quiet of "The Beast" outdoors, the kitchen is a different scene altogether.

There're beans to bake, and mac and cheese to whip up, and potato salad, and macaroni salad, and collard greens, and Brunswick stew or soup, and the three kinds of slaw. And what about the pickles, Lord A'mighty, the pickles: sweet pepper, hot pepper, garlic, spicy, sweet, horseradish, mustard, onion, green

tomato! And then there's the fried stuff: French fries, hush puppies, onion rings, yeah, fried pickles too, and fried green tomatoes, not to mention the Cobb, chopped, Caesar and BLT salads and the barbequed tofu. And what about the breads and cookies? Cornbread, pumpkin muffins, and the small and large sandwich buns. Someone has to make all of this stuff!

"On the weekends it's like a food factory," says Craig lolling his head in amazement. "We are rolling through so much food, we're cooking in such big batches, and so, yeah, it's been great." And if that hasn't kept him busy enough, there's the catering arm. Barbeque is perfect for informal occasions, from a kid's birthday to a UVA event. And just the other day, he experimented with barbequed goat. "I wrapped those baby goats in bacon and I smoked 'em for 12 hours really slow and we pulled 'em and made an eggplant barbeque sauce, and I mean it was unbelievable."

A motorcyclist walks out the door, descends the steps and cranks up his big bad bike. Hartman knows him by name and bids him adieu as he does everyone. "Creating relationships...You've got to win your customers over. You gotta make sure they know you appreciate them, and we want that feel... We want it to be nice; we want it to be relaxing; we want it to be friendly."

What does the future hold? Another restaurant? A franchise maybe? Gourmet barbequed goat? "We'll see," he says noncommittally. "We haven't made that decision yet. If we end up doing something, it has to be equally as good." Then his eyes light up; "a totally different concept, like...an old-school fish fry."

BBQEX

"A little hectic-ness"

It's a Thursday afternoon, and even though it's way past the traditional lunch hour, it's nuts around here.

A father and son team (the lad is obviously a Fork Union Military Academy cadet) is grabbing a bite before they get a head start on their weekend. Over there is a table of clucking, gray-haired church ladies. In swaggers a passel of bikers, followed by a flock of UVA preppies. A couple of tat-covered 20-somethings sip Jomo Lagers as their cell phones recharge. A trim military looking guy with 'CIT Instructor' on his shirt waits in line along with a covey of PBM employees. Two tourists in a mini RV (where did they park that?) stroll in. County administrator Julie Jordan is having a power lunch with somebody in the corner. Next to her, a family with five kids, from toddlers to 'tweens, doodle with crayons on the butcher paper tablecloths. Two heat-exhausted and begrimed construction workers...well, you get the idea.

This is the Barbeque Exchange in Gordonsville. It's been like this ever since it opened a year and a half ago. It is the miracle on Martinsburg Avenue.

When things calm down a little, sometime between 3-5 p.m., award winning fine dining chef Craig Hartman spares a moment to chat about what he and his wife/business partner, Donna, have created here, namely, "a place where anybody could go. You could have a motorcycle club here and you could have a kid's baseball team over here, and you

could have some kids from UVA over there, and some wine tasters. But they would all feel comfortable with each other."

They do because they are all sharing the Barbeque Exchange experience.

"When I go to New Orleans, the architecture, the weather, the culture, the people, the food, everything fits," observes Hartman. "We were thinking to ourselves what would really fit in this area? This is exactly what came up. A barbeque restaurant in Gordonsville would be something that would work...We want to be the place that fits with the countryside, that fits with the people, that fits with the farms, that fits with the art."

They talked about it for a whole year before they did anything. Now try to imagine this: here's Craig Hartman, working his gourmet magic in kitchens in high-end establishments like Clifton Inn and Keswick Hall; here he is at the top of his culinary game, and he and his wife are talking about starting a barbeque joint??? You gotta be kidding.

There are a lot of answers to this question, but the most basic is quite simple; he wanted to be outdoors. "Growing up as a fine dining chef, I've been inside for 39 years, you know, 80 to 100 hours per week, indoors," he shrugs. Besides, he adds, "I always loved barbeque. It's real cooking. There's something kind of masculine about it and kind of primal...It's real food and it makes a statement about the area we live in, the south."

Another reason: he and



Craig and Donna Hartman created the Barbeque Exchange because they felt it "fit" our area of Virginia. The painting behind them was done by his mother Rita Sweeney. The Hartmans located their BBQ restaurant in what used to be Hardware Plus on Martinsburg Avenue in Gordonsville. When Hartman saw the building was for sale, he said to himself, "Wow, this is the place."



Donna didn't want to have to share decisions with a partner, which is a necessity in a fine dining establishment, what with the flatware and the china and the crystal and the wine cellar and the PR firm and the hoity toity wait staff and all. "We can do this without having to go look for partners. It can be us," Craig told Donna. "We'll live and die by what we do."

And so, he was driving down Martinsville Avenue when he saw the For Sale sign on what used to be Hardware Plus. He tried not to make a decision based on emotion but, "This one hit me really hard. 'Wow! That's the place,'" he said to himself. So he bought the little building, poured 100 hours of his spare time into a "well-thought-out" business plan that Virginia Community Bank wholeheartedly embraced, and he started drawing. At each stage of this planning process, "I went over it with the county building inspector," whom he credits for helping him get it right. As a result his final set of plans sailed through.

"Then, of course, we had some new discoveries," grimaces Hartman a little sheepishly. He admits, in hindsight, that maybe he shouldn't have contracted and subcontracted this job himself, while maintaining his job at Keswick Hall. Some structural issues had to be resolved and then there was this matter regarding the sewer line that was uphill from the restaurant. "It was frustrating to me," he admits, "but it really went the way it should have gone...it worked out."

First they put out a sign that said "Coming soon, BBQ." Of course anybody traveling on 15 through town saw it. "So then we put an e-r, 'Coming sooner,'" he laughs. And

then, on a February day, when you would expect business to be terrible, that sign was replaced by "Finally we are open," and within minutes, I mean, we were full. So it was kinda neat."

And they have been full ever since. "I was thinking to myself, I hope we have a line one day." One day! Heck Craig, there's a line here



Vicki Perkins Dean and her sister Nancy, were born and raised in Gordonsville. They are the face of the Barbeque Exchange because, most days, they take your order. They are the first people the customer sees.

every day! "Yup, pretty much some days; almost every day. It can be insane." He originally thought five employees could do the job. Today, he has 20. Needless to say, he gave up the gig at Keswick Hall late last summer.

Of the response from the public, he says "I was very surprised. It just took off pretty fast. We didn't do any advertising and the local people were extremely supportive and I'm very thankful for that." He admits the parking is "terrible," except, of course, for the railroad engineers.

"They will stop the freight train, hop off, walk around, get their food, get back on and take off," laughs Craig. "Frankly we love it." He flashes a game winning grin. "I get to be outside."

Everything has been thought-out around here. For one, it's clean. There are no peanut hulls on the floor, no smoky greasy ceilings and

people who love what they're doing, giving people service. We train our people. 'People walk through that door, you make sure you say Hi to them within five seconds. I don't care where you are, just yell it across,'" he tells his staff. "You see a mean person, you say 'I'm gonna make that person happy before they walk off this line.'"

The order process is blessedly low-tech. No touch-screen computer order thingies. "We want them to yell it back. We make some mistakes. We're going to forget some French fries. But we want people to hear it...a little hectic-ness. We just think it's nice." Hecticness; that's not a word is it?

"An order of puppies!" shouts Vicki Perkins Dean in the general direction of the kitchen. She and her sister Nancy are one of the many reasons the Barbeque Exchange is such a success. Born and raised in Gordonsville, Vicki and Nancy are the public face of this place. They take your order. They call you "hon."

A hand from the kitchen mysteriously produces the deep fat fried cornmeal goodies. Vicki heaps a generous portion of fragrant barbeque on a

homemade bun, asks if you want slaw on it or on the side, and which kind of the three slaws do you want? Everything but the catsup and the Texas Pete is homemade here...everything, even the pickles.

Vicki pushes your order down the line to the cashier. You stroll with it to one of the signature picnic benches with butcher paper for a table cloth and paper towels for napkins, crayons for the kids, and the caddy of sauces. Now, set yourself down and settle in for the ultimate Barbeque Exchange experience.

G'ville 'Que



It starts with a natural charcoal fire, which ignites and chars the hickory.



The charred Hickory logs are shoveled into the firebox of "The Beast."



The fresh boneless pork shoulders rotate through "The Beast" for 10 hours before they are done.

"All these different places, they have their different barbeques, and these people are very, yeah, they're kind of territorial about their 'que," says Craig Hartman. For example, he explains there are several North Carolina styles from east to west involving cooking a whole hog and then chopping it on a hot plate while vinegar boils through it. The further west you go in North Carolina, the more the vinegar is accompanied by catsup.

South Carolina is rooted in mustard. Kansas City and Memphis both dry rub their barbeque but offer different sauces: grilled tomato for KC; dark molasses for Graceland. There's even a Texas and a northeast style. The list goes on and on.

What Hartman has done is offer a homemade sauce that touches on each of these regional preferences, from hot and spicy to sweet and mild. And he's come up with his own way of curing and cooking the meat. As he terms it, "Let's come up with a way of smoking pork and ribs and all those kinds of things that is not like everybody else but has some of the strengths from all of the barbeque styles, because Virginia doesn't have its own barbeque style."

Is there a Gordonsville 'que? "Not yet," hedges Hartman, "I hope one day they'll say there is." For now, we'll just have to say that there certainly is a BBQX-style that is unique, involving a closely guarded secret that may be just a tad addictive.

Craig and Donna Hartman have put a lot of research into this. For example, did you know that the word barbeque does not originate from the French phrase "barbe-a-queue" which literally means "beard to tail," in reference to using the whole hog. No, it comes from a West Indian Taino word for slow roasting meats on sticks over coals, known as barbacoa. "It's really a native

American thing," points out Hartman.

Here's another surprise. "Look, I'm a fine dining chef and everything," he says, but "I have never been to a barbeque class, and I have never watched another barbeque person cook barbeque in my life. I've eaten it, but I've never watched and I've never learned from anyone." Well... maybe he watched his Dad when he was growing up as a kid in Philly, but you get the idea.

He adds that he is a perfectionist. Over the past 39 years, whenever he has cooked anything, "I tasted it and then I thought what is good about this, what is bad, how can I make it better tomorrow. And that's how I've operated my entire life in the kitchen. I'm always upset about something about my food. So, every day, I start over."

It's the same with the 'que. "The first month we cooked barbeque, I think it was acceptable, but I don't think it was that good. The second month it was a little more acceptable; the third month a little more because we started learning." Even today, "We've tasted every batch." And are you ready for this? Since they opened, they have cooked 200,000 pounds of meat!

Over the past year and a half, this is the formula they've come up with: Smithfield boneless pork shoulders only, never frozen. He reasons that out of a whole hog, you get 30 percent yield; whereas with the shoulders he gets close to 50 percent yield in half the cooking time. He injects the fresh pork shoulders with apple cider and "some different other things too."

Next comes the super-secret rub, "that we affectionately call 'crack,' And the reason is, people kept eating it and saying 'what are you putting in here, crack? I'm coming back every day; I need it more and more.' So, it got the nickname 'crack,'"



Everything except the catsup and the Texas Pete sauce is made on premises...everything. Chef Hartman has tried to capitalize on the best of regional barbecue styles and sauces from the Carolinas to Kansas City and in between.