

Follow the Mississippi BBQ Trail // by Carmen Cristo



MSBBQTrail note: photo by Amiee Dickerson

Jim Hatten began the Mississippi BBQ Trail as a way to get the word out about barbecue joints around the state.

Food is a spiritual experience for southerners. But until Jim Hatten launched the Mississippi BBQ Trail last June, his career path went nowhere near food.

Following about six years of active duty in the Air Force, Hatten attended a number of colleges, including Weber State University; Utah State University, where he earned an avionics maintenance license in 1984; Mississippi State University, where he earned a bachelor's of arts and sciences in philosophy and religion in 1988; and the Iliff School of Theology, where he earned a master's of divinity degree in 1990. *MSBBQTrail note: Mr. Hatten was a M.Div. student from 1988 to 1990 at Iliff School of Theology, Denver, CO.,*

In 2009, Hatten opened a consulting firm, the Jim Hatten School of Management, until a series of devastating injuries left him unable to work. Hatten was evicted from his apartment and was homeless for four months. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs took him in, helped him get healthy and gave him a scholarship to go back to school. This series of events set him on a brand-new path—a trail, if you will.

Hatten enrolled at Hinds Community College in Raymond in 2013, graduating with an associate's degree in marketing management technologies last year.

During that time, he stumbled across an interesting concept while completing homework. As he contemplated building a grill from a 5,000-gallon steel tank for a resort development, he found an article about the feral hog epidemic in the South and solutions to combat it. Hatten wondered

how he and the barbecue-loving food culture could play a part in keeping these wild animals from destroying local farms and ranches.

He spent months researching the barbecue business. When Hatten found that Mississippi brought in about \$75 million in beef and pork sales annually, a question came to mind: If it's such a big business, why do you never see advertisements? And how big could it be if you did?

"The cool mom-and-pop places that everyone wants to visit can't afford to advertise down the street," Hatten says. "My research shows that around 22 percent of these places have a website. Some had a Facebook page, but they were not being maintained." He also surveyed eight restaurant-review websites and found a startling lack of reviews. "That gap is where the inspiration came to me," he says.

Hatten took that inspiration and created the Mississippi BBQ Trail, an affordable three-tier advertising system for the state's diverse beef and pork offerings.

Because of the lack of online resources in an increasingly digital market, the website came first. It contains a list of 90 barbecue joints on the "trail" with addresses and phone numbers. The joints populate a digital barbecue map of Mississippi. Getting on the list is a process that involves verifying a license, health department certificate and ability to give receipts. In the future, customers will be able to stack up receipts to qualify for discounts and awards. The second advertising tool he plans is a print guide with information about the restaurants. Selling the Magnolia State's best barbecue sauces online is the third component and the way Hatten, 55, hopes to attract visitors from outside the state.

The ultimate goal is connecting consumers with local businesses. "I want to show people not only how good this food is, but how fun these places are and how cool these people really are," Hatten says.

For more information, visit msbbqtrail.com or find the Mississippi BBQ Trail on Facebook.