

# MEAT AS MUSE

A steady plume of smoke rises into the night air on the south side of Coxe Avenue in Asheville, North Carolina. Behind a barbed wire fence on the fringes of downtown, amid warehouses, car shops, and the burgeoning development of the South Slope neighborhood, Elliott Moss settles in for an all-night vigil with a 200-pound hog.

The chef wears a yellow Duke's mayonnaise t-shirt, a pair of Levi's that fit just a touch more than snug, work boots, and his trademark cap affixed with a pin shaped like a marijuana leaf but patterned to look like a dripping slice of pepperoni pizza. One might say this is his uniform. Elliott Moss is an artist. At the moment, meat is his muse. Tonight, his porcine companion will be washed in the transformative elements of smoke and fire. By daylight it will emerge as the main attraction for the neighboring brewery's backyard barbecue. This hog, as with a host of others cooked over the last two years, is a foretaste of Buxton Hall Barbecue, Moss's long-awaited brick-and-mortar concept with restaurateur Meherwan Irani, owner of Chai Pani and MG Road Cocktail Lounge. It's 11:30 p.m. on Friday night. Shovel in hand, Moss tends to the oak logs piled in the top of his handcrafted burn

BY KEIA MASTRIANNI

barrel. Throughout the night, glowing deposits will drop into the bottom, coals like fiery tender to coax the hog into smoky submission.

Moss is joined by trusty sidekicks Dan Silo and Sarah Cousler, the two main cooks at his current pop-up restaurant, The Thunderbird, and his father, Terrell Moss, in town for a weekend visit. Moss jabs at the burning wood with the shovel, releasing a flurry of neon ashes into the midnight sky like a million tiny stars. Cooking a hog is a skill that requires patience and endurance, careful timing bolstered by the use of all the senses. As the wood burns down, Moss and his father intuitively load more logs into the barrel, instincts born and bred in Florence, South Carolina.

"I ate barbecue like people eat pizza," says Moss. "We'd go to the store and get a loaf of white bread, a pound of barbecue, and cole slaw. That was our meal."

Just down the road from his home in Florence was Scott's Bar-B-Que, one of the most lauded barbecue shacks in the country. Moss counts pitmaster Rodney Scott as one of his biggest barbecue influences. If you taste Moss' barbecue carefully, you can find whispers of Scott's influence in the red pepper-laden vinegar mop.

ASHEVILLE  
CHEF ELLIOTT MOSS'  
COOKING CAREER  
IS INDELIBLY  
INFLUENCED  
BY HIS  
INNER ARTIST

PHOTOS BY  
ANDREW THOMAS LEE

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MOSS' TATTOO OF PETUNIA THE PIG WAS MODIFIED TO HAVE HER HOLDING A SHOVEL

deeply into music. He took art classes throughout high school and spent hours crafting mixtapes, listening to punk rock, and designing record labels.

At age seventeen, Moss nabbed his first kitchen job working for Chick-fil-A. He began cooking primarily to feed himself and to impress girls. His Casanova hits were Italian-inspired creations like chicken parmesan made with Chick-fil-A chicken and frozen ravioli.

### THE PATH TO COOK

After a move to Columbia, South Carolina, Moss realized that he wanted to cook for a living, but no one would hire him, a fast-food employee without “restaurant” experience. His opportunity came in 2005, when a local bar called The Whig came onto the scene. By law, the bar was required to have food. Moss approached owner Jonathan Robinson (who now owns The Admiral and Ben’s Tune-Up in Asheville) and asked if he could run his kitchen. “I opened the kitchen with no real restaurant experience,” says Moss. “It was just me. I cooked the food, I ran the food, I washed the dishes.”

Moss moved to Philadelphia next and reluctantly took a head chef position at a small Italian restaurant in the neighborhood where he lived. “I think I learned a lot about myself in Philly,” says Moss. It was there, he says, that he had the freedom to experiment and was first exposed to fresh vegetables. He also began reaching into his past to cook dishes that reminded him of the South.

A year later, he returned to the Carolinas contemplating his next move. At that time, the fellows who opened The Whig were looking to open another bar, this time in Asheville. They contacted Moss to do the food once more.

### THE UNLIKELY ADMIRAL

The Admiral opened in a gritty section of West Asheville in December 2007, a divey shoebox, formerly a third-shift bar. For an artistic punk rocker like Moss, the place suited him. For the next seven years, he wore it well.

What began as a bar became something much

more than that. Inside a tiny open space barely passable as a kitchen, Moss slowly transformed The Admiral into one of the pioneering restaurants of Asheville’s contemporary food scene. “Elliott figured out what West Asheville wanted before they even knew what they wanted,” says Chef Brian Canipelli of Cucina 24 “He was doing things that weren’t being done. There were no rules. It was wide open. Different.”

“I knew about it [The Admiral] because a buddy said there was this restaurant in West Asheville with prison silverware and incredible food, you gotta check it out,” says Mike Moore, executive chef/owner of Seven Sows and founder of The Blind Pig Supper Club.

Moore admits that he would dine at The Admiral before he even knew Moss just to watch him cook. “I saw a guy who loved what he did and did it very differently. It was extremely obvious to me and profound,” says Moore. “I knew it at that very moment, that what I was seeing was an artist, Elliott’s own individuality.”

At The Admiral, Moss played with texture, color, and the rule of odds—artists’ principles executed on the plate. He summoned, too, humble inspirations in order to create his own distinct brand of Southern food; a long wait in the gro-



cery store checkout line might inspire that evening’s featured dish, such as a Slim Jim hash.

“The way I approach menu writing and development,” explains Moss, “is to think about what I want to eat because I’ve gotta cook it and taste it and dish it out all day. Then I think about childhood memories...how can I incorporate flavors that I remember?”

In 2013, Moss ended his tenure at The Admiral, his third restaurant gig ever, with a nomination by the James Beard Foundation for Best Chef: Southeast.

### TO JAPAN AND BACK AGAIN

The inward-thinking chef moved on to pursue new endeavors in Asheville: a Japanese-inspired yakitori concept at Ben’s Tune-Up and a barbecue concept called Buxton Hill (note the one vowel difference between this first “Hill” and his current project “Hall”). To prepare for Ben’s Tune-Up, Moss immersed himself in the study of Japanese cuisine, taking his education of Asian flavors and techniques, particularly fermentation, to heart. After a short stint at Ben’s Tune-Up and an ill-fated beginning with Buxton Hill, both concepts fell through.

When the news broke, Meherwan Irani, owner of Chai Pani and MG Road Cocktail Lounge reached out. Irani and Moss discovered that they had been similarly thrust into the culinary scene from unlikely beginnings. Irani had never operated a restaurant before he opened Chai Pani in 2009, and Moss had never attended culinary school or worked under anyone. “I was always really impressed with his demeanor, at how quiet and humble he was,” says Irani, who first met Moss through The Blind Pig circuit.

The two formed a partnership and decided to move on a new concept inside an old skating rink in the South Slope neighborhood. They would call it Buxton Hall Barbecue.

On the long road to restaurant development, Moss kept himself occupied the only way he knew how. He fed people. Filling his time cooking with friends in their kitchens, doing special events and Blind Pig dinners, he also began cooking whole hogs with frequency while in limbo, moving ever closer to his South Carolina roots.

And volumes of unused knowledge on Asian cuisine swirled in Moss’ head, just begging for an outlet. So began Punk Wok, the wildly successful pop-up restaurant that sprung up inside MG Road two nights a week.

Moss entered a new phase of creative expression, one ripe with ferments and pickles, that took foods close to his Southern-fried heart and

weaved them seamlessly with Asian influences and technique.

During that time, Sarah Cousler and Dan Silo joined him in the kitchen while they awaited the opening of Buxton Hall. To keep his team gainfully employed in the interim, Moss replaced Punk Wok with The Thunderbird, a six-nights-a-week nostalgia-fueled notion inspired by a hotel in Florence. Here, Moss riffs on the retro fare one might find at an old-school Southern buffet, and elevates it. Inside The Thunderbird,

**IF YOU TASTE MOSS’ BARBECUE CAREFULLY, YOU CAN FIND WHISPERS OF [RODNEY] SCOTT’S INFLUENCE IN THE RED PEPPER-LADEN VINEGAR MOP.**

you can also find the artist brainstorming his next project. The Alabama white sauce on the fried catfish and grits entrée is a test run for Buxton Hall.

“Elliott is a person with such a specific vision and child-like joy with expressing his creativity,” says Nate Allen, executive chef of Knife & Fork in Spruce Pine, who recently collaborated with Moss at The Thunderbird. “That boy just wants fire and freedom!”

### WAITING TO BEGIN

As he awaits the opening of Buxton Hall later this summer, Moss continues to create, and jumps at every opportunity to cook a hog. His perpetually moving mind and deep-seeded love of barbecue propel him forward.

By daylight of the hog cook, the crew is weary and delirious. Moss has spent little time off his feet, and yet, as the morning birds begin their song, a new energy sweeps over the smoke-soaked chef. “It’s hard work,” he says. “But, it’s a different kind of work.”

Different suits him.

**RIGHT:** ELLIOTT MOSS STOKING A FIRE IN HIS DRIVEWAY, THE SITE OF MUCH BBQ COOKING **OPPOSITE, FROM TOP:** BLIND PIG SUPPER CLUB EVENTS; MOSS’ BUSINESS PARTNER MEHERWAN IRANI PREPS AT THE DINNER WHERE THE TWO MET; MOSS PREPS WITH FOUNDER, MIKE MOORE; MOSS COOKS WITH SC PITMASTER RODNEY SCOTT



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MOSS INSIDE BUXTON HALL, THE FORMER SKATING RINK THAT WILL SOON BE HIS BARBECUE JOINT  
**OPPOSITE:** MOSS PERFORMING VERTICAL ROTISSERIE, BRUSHING THE CHICKEN WITH A SWEET CHILI VINEGAR MOP



## ALL ABOUT HASH

Hash is most certainly a South Carolina thing. No, not the kind you see at breakfast or even the corned beef kind. Elliott Moss likes to call it “meat gravy” and believes the hash he knows was devised as a way to use up all parts of an animal, mostly pigs, after slaughter. It originated long before barbecue restaurants served the public. To make hash, one grinds up a variety of meat parts—offal, pig heads, chicken, and dried out barbecue—and simmers it down with barbecue sauce, family kitchen spice, onions, and a starch (rice and/or potatoes) until it is soupy. It is usually served over rice.

When Buxton Hall Barbecue opens its doors, you can be sure Elliott Moss will have this regional and varied specialty on the menu. Not one establishment that serves hash is alike: “I think a lot of South Carolinians take a lot of pride in hash for that reason. It’s ours,” says Moss.

## ELLIOTT’S EASY BBQ HASH

This is an easy bbq hash, made with ingredients that can be picked up at the grocery store. This recipe pulls from a few of my favorite hash dishes and brings them all together. Remember: there isn’t one type of hash—everyone has their own. Feel free to play around with this recipe. Substitute the ground beef for leftover cooked chicken, or liver for leftover bbq pork. You can do the same with the starches by substituting cooked rice for cooked potatoes. There is no right or wrong way to make hash. — *Elliott Moss*

- 1 pound ground beef
- 1 pound sage pork sausage
- 1 pound chicken livers, finely chopped or ground
- 1 large onion, finely diced or ground
- 3 cloves of garlic, finely diced
- 2 tablespoons kosher salt
- 2 tablespoons freshly ground black pepper
- 1 tablespoon onion powder
- 1 tablespoon garlic powder
- 4 cups smoky BBQ sauce (use your favorite)
- 2 cups mustard BBQ sauce or (mix 1¾ cup yellow mustard with ¼ cup honey)
- ¼ cup Texas Pete hot sauce, plus more for serving
- ½ cup Worcestershire sauce
- 3 cups cooked rice (don’t rinse rice before cooking), plus more for serving
- 10 cups water, plus additional if needed
- Soda crackers, for serving

1. Add meats, onion, and garlic to a large stock pot. Season with salt, pepper, onion powder, and garlic powder. Cook over medium heat until meat is slightly browned.
2. Add BBQ sauces, hot sauce, Worcestershire, cooked rice and 4 cups water. Bring to a boil, then reduce to low heat and simmer. Cook for 90 minutes, stirring frequently to prevent sticking.
3. After 90 minutes, add 4 more cups water, and continue to stir often. Continue cooking for another 90 minutes.
4. Add 2 cups water and continue cooking for 45 minutes, stirring frequently, or until the water has reduced to leave the hash with a slightly loose, meaty gravy consistency.
5. Serve over cooked hot rice. Garnish with hot sauce and soda crackers.

*Yield: 4 quarts (hash party size!)*

## HOME STATE HASH FAVORITES

When he visits his homestate, Moss searches out new places to try hash. Here are five of his South Carolina favorites.

**DOWDS** in Newberry  
 Dowds isn’t a restaurant, but they supply Newberry with hash through retail outlets. Search it out at the local Bi-Lo (look for the bright orange SC agriculture sticker). It’s mustard-based hash, and instead of ground meat, it’s stringy. They cook it for hours and hours over wood.

**TRUE BBQ** in West Columbia  
 True BBQ is a newer joint with an old-school mom-and-pop feel. Their hash is ground, orange-red in color, and beef based. I haven’t come across that before, and I think that’s why I like it so much.

**SWEATMAN’S** in Holly Hill  
 Sweatman’s is one of the most adorable barbecue joints. They are open only on Friday and Saturday, which makes it special and you know it’s fresh. Their hash is orange-red ground pork. I’ve been told they don’t use any fillers (rice or potatoes) and you can tell. Just meat, sauce, and seasonings.

**DUKE’S** in Orangeburg  
 Duke’s hash is so different from other hash I’ve had, so I love it for that reason. Orange in color, ground pork, and lots of potato up front. It’s almost like a potato gravy. The potato isn’t chunky, but smooth in texture.

**COOPER’S COUNTRY STORE** in Salters  
 This country store is a must for the experience alone: a big country store in the middle of nowhere that supplies the town folks with barbecue hog, country hams, and hash. Cooper’s hash is vinegar based and ground. There is not much color, no mustard or tomato. It definitely has some offal or liver, maybe some pig head. They sell it in pints, frozen or fresh, so I always grab one for the road.