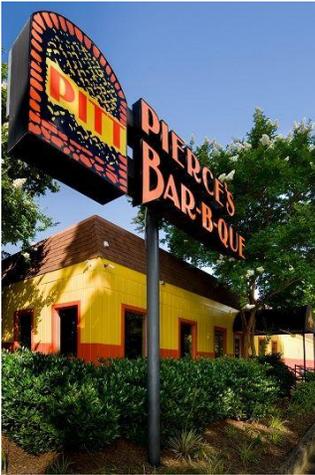




Pierce's Pitt Bar-B-Que Reaches Golden Anniversary by Staying Relevant—and Delicious

Popular eatery among three York County businesses celebrating 50-year milestone

By Melissa James, York County Contributor



When a business goes out of its way to make great food, people will go out of their way to reach it. That's been the lesson for one of our region's best barbecue joints—in one of our region's least convenient locations.

Three miles from the interstate and six miles outside town, Pierce's Pitt Bar-B-Que is "in the middle of nowhere," says owner Jay Pierce. "You have to be creative to build that clientele, but to do it and then stay in business for 50 years, it takes good customer service, quality of your product, and staying relevant." In Pierce's case, that relevance includes frequently updating the menu and being "clean, green and local."

All of the restaurant's beef is grass fed, and the chickens are free-range and steroid free. Pierce said they use local meat and locally grown produce in their dishes, partnering with KelRae Farm in Toano. Pierce's is even local in its hiring, with multiple generations of families working there.



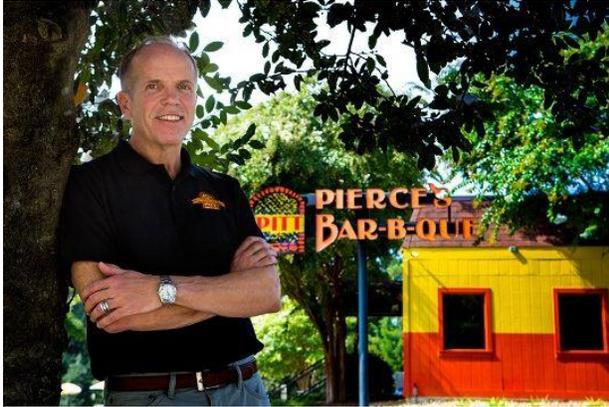
"Some of my employees are second and third generation, and they all have that same sense of pride," he said. "We follow the Golden Rule – because of that, it has allowed us to have the work family that we have. When we get recognized, I attribute that to my team."

And recognition has been abundant. Over the years, they have been featured in media including Southern Living, The Travel Channel, "Cooking with Paula Deen," National Geographic's "The 10 Best of Everything," and several times on The Food Network— not to mention many local publications. The business has come a long way from its humble start back in October 1971. Jay's father, Julius "Doc" Pierce, got the idea to start a barbecue restaurant after playing with homemade sauces in the kitchen.

"I learned about produce and spices and natural food from my parents' gardening," Jay said. "I remember my dad saying, 'Taste this,' 'Taste that,' 'Do you like it'? He would explain the difference in adding black pepper versus cracked red pepper. Once we combined them, he'd have me watch the texture as it heats. But I was 15, I just wanted to go out with my friends!"

With experience operating several restaurants, Doc Pierce rented some land and worked with a friend to construct the building.

"We were so broke, we didn't even have any money for change. That first day, my dad borrowed \$40 from a friend for the cash box. Sandwiches cost 80 cents apiece, and soft drinks were a quarter. At the end of the day, we'd made \$80. My mother [Verdie] started crying, 'We're going to starve to death!'"



But this hidden gem quickly found a cult following, and today Pierce's Pitt Bar-B-Cue cooks 6,000 pounds of pork per day, selling 478,000 pounds per year (and that's not even counting their beef or chicken!). Their menu includes, of course, barbecue plates and sandwiches with coleslaw and hushpuppies, as well as burgers, hot dogs, barbecue chicken, smoked chicken, ribs and a variety of Southern sides. They even employ an onsite baker to create their desserts—homemade cookies, cakes, pies, brownies and banana pudding.

Doc's Original Bar-B-Cue Sauce is still served, and also is available in bottles, along with other sauce options. Yet Jay credits customer service as much as food quality in the business's success:

"We try, and we care. We're all very appreciative of every customer that walks through that door." They've overcome several challenges over the years—speaking before General Assembly on behalf of independent restaurants in Virginia, who were going to be removed from interstate signage (Jay succeeded), and working with County officials to bring city utilities to their remote location (including water lines, sewage lines, street lights and paved roads). But their biggest obstacle arrived last year, with the March pandemic lockdown.

"It happened overnight. I drove here on March 18, prepared to lock the doors." But he didn't want to put his employees out of work, so they set up tents.

"No one came," he said. "But then we started taking food out to people's cars. I called another local business, David A. Nice Builders, who put me in touch with a man in Gloucester, and now we have 42 picnic tables... and that became our dining room." Finally, Pierce's "bad" location had become a benefit, as it provided not only distance from other businesses, but his extra acre and a half of land meant ample outdoor dining space.

"We're back at 2018 levels," Jay happily reported. "People are back in droves, they're glad to be out. The interstate is packed, and we have lines out the door!" Even with offering over \$15/hour for most positions, plus benefits, Jay said they remain 14 employees short. He's planning to install a kiosk ordering system to move customers through more quickly.

In the meantime, Pierce's employees are working overtime and six days a week, without complaint.

"I'm lucky to have enough employees who care about what's going on," he said. "Many have been here for decades, and they are my family."



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