

Talk

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**SALT LICK
TURNS 40**

Staying Power

NOT MUCH HAS CHANGED IN THE SALT LICK'S 40 YEARS, AND THAT'S A GOOD THING.

[by JENNIFER MCCUTCHEN]

THE RUSSET FLOOR HAS CRACKS IN IT. The once-white stones that make up the fire pit are aged brown or dyed black with soot. The long, weathered picnic tables have fissures in them. Not much has changed since The Salt Lick first opened its doors 40 years ago, and that seems to be what attracts thousands to the barbecue ranch on any given day.

Nestled in the hills of Driftwood, on the outskirts of Austin, along a curvy, two-lane country road in what seems to be the middle of nowhere, lies The Salt Lick. The town is small, yes, but the restaurant's reputation is not. Known worldwide, The Salt Lick epitomizes Texas barbecue. It's loved not just for its mouth-watering, hearty barbecue but for the iconic, down-home ranch experience it offers.

The Salt Lick was founded by the late Thurman Roberts and his wife, Hisako Roberts. After the Civil War, the Roberts family migrated via wagon train from Mississippi, through Georgia, South Carolina, Austin and finally to Driftwood, settling there in 1867. Thurman was born and raised there, and during World War II, he met Hisako on the Hawaiian island of Kauai, where he was stationed. A love blossomed, and in 1948, the couple moved to Driftwood to raise a family.

In the mid-60s, Thurman quit a job that required him to travel for weeks at a time.

"WHEN MY FAMILY CAME OVER ON THAT WAGON TRAIN ... THEY CARRIED BIG METAL GRILLS WITH THEM. ... THAT'S THE WAY MY FATHER WAS TAUGHT TO BARBECUE."

After brainstorming ideas that would keep him close to home, the family decided to open a restaurant. "My father grew up in Driftwood, and the only thing he wanted to do was live in Driftwood," explains Scott Roberts, who took over the business from his parents. "One day, he and my mother got a yellow legal tablet and came up with 54 things we could do as a family ... in Driftwood. The Salt Lick was the 14th thing on the list, and ... it beat everything else out."



Robert Gonzales (left) with his father, Carmen, a 38-year Salt Lick veteran.

Scott, who took over The Salt Lick in 1985, still lives by the same mantra his parents did when first opening the restaurant: give a quality product at a reasonable price and be Hill Country friendly. The stones of the building, quarried from the family ranch, are still the same. The open pit, built by hand, is still the same. The tables, cabinets and stonework, constructed by Thurman himself, are the same. The recipes, handed down from generation to generation, are the same, and the method of cooking the meat is the same as it was when the Robertses settled in Driftwood in 1867.

"When my family came over on that wagon train, the way they cooked is that they carried big metal grills with them, and they'd start a fire and put rocks around it ... to basically hold the heat and smoke in," explains Scott. They'd sear the meat over the fire on one end of the grill, then move it to the other end and slow cook it. "That's the way my father was taught

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to barbecue. And if you look at the big round pit, you'll see the fire is there, the grill is there and then the big rock wall around it is [there]."

The only thing that has slightly altered, reveals Scott, is that the recipes have been Texified. "And by Texified, I mean they took on local, Texas ingredients," he says. The famous sweet barbecue sauce that's sold worldwide was initially derived from the Southeast, but by adding cayenne pepper and chili dulce to the mix, it took on its own tangy flair.

When you walk through the squeaky doors of The Salt Lick, the first thing you notice is the famous stone pit, the only one left in Central Texas and, perhaps, all of Texas. You can feel the heat, smell the smoke and see the meat as it's cooked above the 150-degree pit, which can hold some 40 briskets, 20 racks of ribs and numerous pounds of sausage links and turkey. It's the bastion of the restaurant—the first element to the cattery when it opened in 1967 and the main element that still stands today. Everything was built around the pit, and everything in the restaurant revolves around the pit today.

"The pit is the king. The Food Network, everybody has filmed it. No one else has this in their restaurants. No one knows how to operate it," says Miriam Wilson, director of operations for The Salt Lick.

"This area ... always had a good feel for my father," explains Scott. "So when it came time for him to build the restaurant ... he got out of his truck, and he made a mark in the ground with his boot. Then he got a barbecue fork and made another mark and basically sized it, and that's how we built that big, round circular pit. ... It was sized just for him."

Scott was 16 when he helped build the open pit, and at that time, it was The Salt Lick. Thurman would travel from their home to the open pit on Thursday nights with a cot to sleep on and some meat and start barbecuing. He wouldn't return home until all his meat was sold.

Eventually, a customer asked him to add a picnic table, and not long after, Scott helped his father build the first slab of the restaurant. They



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STEPHANIE A. SHAW, M.D. received her Doctorate of Medicine from The University of Texas Medical School at Galveston in 2002. After receiving her medical degree, she completed her Internal Medicine Residency training at The University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston, where she was awarded with Resident of the Year and Outstanding Performance in Outpatient Clinical Care. Dr. Shaw completed her Endocrinology specialty training at Baylor College of Medicine and MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, Texas.

Dr. Shaw has been involved in various research projects, presentations and publications. Her clinical and research interests concentrate on diseases of the thyroid with a particular focus in thyroid carcinoma.

Dr. Shaw is an active member of the American Thyroid Association, American Association of Clinical Endocrinologist, Endocrine Society and Travis County Medical Society.

Stephanie is a native Texan and in her spare time enjoys hiking, traveling and spending time with her family.

Dr. Shaw is joining Dr. Thomas Blevins, Dr. Luis Casaubon and Dr. Valerie Espinosa

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constructed rock walls on three sides and a wood wall on the other. It held eight people. There was no electricity, no running water and no bathrooms. In fact, the first nighttime meal was served with kerosene lanterns. As business grew, the family built another section, unhinged the original wood wall and moved it down. Thurman always knew the business would grow, says Scott, and that's what the wood wall represented to him: hope.

As The Salt Lick expanded, so did the number of customers. Scott remembers working around the restaurant on the weekends, cutting and turning the meat, washing dishes, peeling potatoes and everything else that came with maintaining a family restaurant. "It was time consuming," he muses. "It kept you from going out on dates on the weekends."

Nowadays, 3,000 people walk through The Salt Lick's doors—or just hang out on the ranch to enjoy the live music—on any given Saturday. What once held eight customers now holds 800. Many nights, you can even find deputies secured for traffic control. And it's a sure bet that one of the main ingredients in The Salt Lick's success is its dedication to quality: treating customers and employees with respect and sincerity.

It is a true family affair, from the owners to the 20-year-veteran employees who have become like extended family to the Robertses. Carmen Gonzales was just 15 years old when he started at The Salt Lick. He recalls spending the night there to cook the meat, just as Thurman did in 1967. Gonzales, now 53, still works at the restaurant alongside his son, Robert, who helps maintain the pit.

Since its inception in 1967, the restaurant has added four locations: Salt Lick 360 in Westlake, a store in Austin-Bergstrom International Airport and even two spots in Las Vegas. But the Driftwood ranch is still at the heart of the operation. Scott plans to expand the vineyard and add a general store, wood-fire bakery and smokehouse in the next few years.

"The Salt Lick is really just a love story," Scott says. "My father loved Driftwood. Beyond that, it's a *Field of Dreams* story: Build it, and they will come." 