

County Club's communal
vibe and specialties such as
beef brisket, right, make it a
popular gathering spot.

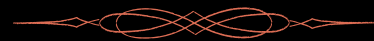




*NOT YOUR
AVERAGE*

'CUE

COUNTY CLUB,
A RUSTIC-CHIC EATERY
ON JEFFERSON STREET,
SPECIALIZES IN LOCALLY SOURCED
SMOKED MEATS
AND SPECIALTY LIBATIONS



By Patti Nickell | Photos by Mark Mahan



Co-owner and chef Johnny Shipley checks the food as it is plated.

It's the enticing smell you notice first — a heady aroma of smoking pork and beef wafting through the air at the north end of Jefferson Street. Even if you hadn't thought you were hungry before, this aroma is enough to convince you to follow your nose to an unassuming gray building that looks more like the storage facility it once was than its current incarnation as one of Lexington's premier barbecue joints.

Actually, calling County Club a barbecue joint is an oversimplification. Anchoring one end of a street that has become synonymous with Lexington's restaurant renaissance, County Club lists menu options that include not just pork but poutine, not just chopped chicken but chilaquiles, and to wash it all down, not just beer but La Boutanche Grenache, a red wine from France.

It might be the only barbecue place in Lexington — or in the South for that matter — where kale greens are considered an accept-

able topping for the chopped steak sandwich or where the smoked chicken wings are dry rubbed with a Chinese Sichuan sauce.

In contrast to most Southern kitchens, County Club's fried chicken preparation changes weekly, and the French-Canadian specialty poutine uses Kenny's Farmhouse Cheese for curds and has a vegetarian gravy.

Did I say the menu was unconventional?

Likewise, the diverse clientele encompasses all facets of Lexington society — soccer moms and students; educators and entre-

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Left, Shipley and business partner Chesney Turner looked for inspiration from past Lexington dining institutions in creating County Club. Below, daily specials are listed on a blackboard.



Above, Stephania Sharkey puts the finishing touches on a meaty sandwich special. Right, warm evenings beckon customers to linger on the patio.



preneurs; hedge fund managers with impressive portfolios; and hipsters with impressive body art; not to mention professors, painters, publishers, and politicians.

Lexington Mayor Jim Gray, who routinely pops in three or four times a month, is one of County Club's most ardent fans, calling it "nice and low key, with great brisket and burgers."

BARBECUE, BIKE POLO, AND BOCCE

On a chilly April Sunday morning, about 25 people are lined up in County Club's parking lot, waiting for the doors to swing open and the scramble for tables to begin. Inside, the flavor of the meats amps up as high as the Jerry Lee Lewis tune blaring across the dining space. Soon, it's standing room only in the parking lot for those not fortunate enough to secure a spot.

Good barbecue isn't hard to find in Kentucky, so why is it that this establishment — open a scant five years — has become the embodiment of pitmastery?

Part of it has to do with the vision of its co-owners, Johnny Shipley and Chesney Turner.

Chef Johnny Shipley sports tattoos, earrings, and a trucker hat, which make him look as if he would be right at home in a Coen Brothers movie. With guilelessness in keeping with some of the quirkiest Coen characters, he seems a bit bemused by the popularity of his 100-seat establishment (50 seats inside and another 50

outside during warm weather).

When asked why County Club has become so popular, he appears to do a figurative head scratch before venturing a guess.

"Well, it's a great space for people to hang out in," he offers, "as our entire staff works to create a fun experience, and we may be the only restaurant in town that is next to a park."

Coolavin Park provides a nice green space abutting the restaurant parking



A charcuterie tray might feature local cheeses.

lot and offers patrons a chance to watch bocce ball and bike polo while enjoying their barbecue.

Then, warming to his subject, Shipley goes on to add, "and of course, there's the food, the nature of which is not traditional barbecue."

Yes, the pork and brisket spend 12 hours smoking in a Kentucky white-oak smoker, which is fairly standard for some pitmasters, but Shipley and his team use all heritage and local meats slaughtered in the Muslim way known as *halal*, which is anything but standard.

FROM SOCIAL WORK TO THE SOCIAL MEDIA

Also anything but standard is the circuitous route Shipley took to get to where he is today. A military brat who lived in — among other places — Germany, Maryland, and Louisville — he graduated from the University of Kentucky with a degree in social work. He might have imagined his future would chart a fairly predictable course.

That turned out not to be the case when he developed a passion for food and cooking.

"This was the 1990s — pre-Internet and Food Network — so I had to learn the old-fashioned way by reading cookbooks," says Shipley.

He also learned by finding mentors among some of Lexington's most notable culinary artists, including John Foster, who was at the time executive chef at Dudley's Restaurant, and Lucy Slone, chef/owner of a la lucie.

With their encouragement, he pursued his passion and spent the next 20 years in the restaurant/hospitality business. He retired after Buster's Pool Hall, where he had his last gig, was demolished to make room for the City Center development.

In 2010 Shipley was coaxed out of retirement by his friends Andrea Sims and Krim Boughalem, who, as he says, "sweet-talked me into accepting the head chef position at their new restaurant, Table 310," where he remained for two years.

During this time Shipley and business partner Chesney Turner had their eyes on a 1,400-square-foot cinder-block building

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Sous chef Jamie Adkins completes an order that includes poutine, foreground, another house specialty.

“

Well, it's a great space for people to hang out in as our entire staff works to create a fun experience.

—JOHNNY SHIPLEY

that at one time had been a storage warehouse for the Rainbo Bread Factory — now West Sixth Brewing — but for years had stood empty and unloved at the north end of Jefferson Street.

After Shipley left Table 310, he and Turner, a freelance interior designer, leased the space from West Sixth's owners and set about turning their dream into a reality. Along with her partner, Hunter Guyon, Turner was in charge of aesthetics.

“We felt the space was open for interpretation,” says Turner, “but we knew we wanted it to be a gathering place, having the comfortable feeling of a dining room outside your own home.”

Using past Lexington institutions Rogers and Saratoga restaurants as models, Turner and Guyon set about mixing high and low elements, such as the chandelier suspended over the communal tables that came from an estate auction in Virginia and the buffalo head Shipley brought with him from Buster's.

While the two might seem somewhat incompatible, it's just another example of a restaurant that doesn't play by the usual rules.

Shipley is nothing if not a rule breaker.

His cooking background had provided him with expertise in both savories and sweets, and his stints with Foster and Slone might have indicated a white linen tablecloth and haute

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cuisine future.

It was not to be. With the space constraints of their new establishment, he came to the conclusion that “barbecue seemed a perfect fit.”

He was, however, determined not to have his new establishment become just another Southern barbecue joint, instead choosing to focus on barbecue traditions around the world.

“So many countries have a unique barbecue tradition,” he explains. “There’s Mongolian and Korean barbecue, yakitori from Japan, and barbecue from Mexico and Southeast Asia.

“I wanted to explore all of them,” he says.

While only a handful of dishes, such as Berkshire pork, brisket, and the Original 193 Burger, are menu staples, season-

al surprises and weekly specials delight County Club’s regular patrons. Tuesdays, for example, feature the restaurant’s double cheeseburger while Wednesdays celebrate tacos.

“Dale [Fisher] and I love County Club, and everyone we bring here loves it too,” says Lexington landscape designer Jon Carloftis.

“We both have a weird concrete-block building fetish and are wild about old gas stations, tire stores, and similar structures from the 1920s and 1930s,” he says. “County Club has that same feel, along with really delicious food and drink. I’m partial to the special salad with the smoked meat on top, and Dale is a fan of the Bloody Marys.”

Another regular, Anne Sabatino Hardy, executive director of Horse Country,

says both she and her husband, Jacob, are “completely addicted to the Brussels sprouts and the convenience.”

“We live just down the street, and in the summer we love to walk over, sit outside, and watch the bike polo practices or play bocce,” she says. “It’s just a great vibe.”

Part of that vibe comes from County Club’s being, as Shipley puts it, “a hybrid of restaurant/bar/barbecue joint and diner.” A place where, despite having been featured on Michael Symon’s show “Burgers, Brews and Cue” on the Food Network, Shipley remains relatively anonymous.

“The majority of the people who come in here have no idea who I am,” he claims. “One night I could be hosting; the next, bartending.”

And that’s just the way he and his devoted clientele like it. **KM**



The design allows the outside to meld with the interior when weather permits.



IF YOU

GO

COUNTY CLUB

555 Jefferson St.

Lexington, KY 40508

(859) 367-0263

www.countyclubrestaurant.com**Hours:**

Tuesday-Thursday,

5 p.m. to 10 p.m.

Friday-Sunday

11 a.m. to 10 p.m.





Bartender Elle Cooler prepares a Bourbon Daisy #100, one of County Club's specialty drinks. Below, the former storage facility is now a fixture in the neighborhood.

