

## Whuttle's brings Southern barbecue to North Salem Walmart



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Salem Statesman Journal

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"Whuttle's?"

On first listen, the name sounds like a joke waiting for a punchline. But the joke is on the patrons, who will find themselves eating their words as they dig into the juicy smoked meats served at the new Whuttle's Barbecue location inside the North Salem Walmart.

The Southern-style barbecue is served up by longtime friends turned business partners Russell Dickerson and David Girley. Their restaurant's presence marks one of the first Walmart and independent restaurant partnerships.

They also are the latest Black-owned brick-and-mortar restaurant owners to join the Salem food scene. They also run a food truck in Eugene.



Dickerson and Girley's friendship and business are built on the balance of Dickerson's talents on the smoker with Girley's business management skills.

The two appear like polar opposites: Dickerson is quiet and gives a long pointed look before cracking off with his dry humor while Girley is chatty and quick to tease, making jokes with his employees and small talk with customers. Their banter bounces off each other in a relaxed manner that reflects their decadeslong friendship.

The name Whuttle's comes from a "miscommunication" of sorts.

Prior to Whuttle's food truck, the duo's catering business was called Russell and David's Barbecue. Folks would ask who made the food, and upon responding with "Russell," folks would reply back but with a mouth full of food. What resulted was the skewing of Dickerson's name, but the two liked the sounds of it.

Their motto, "Food so good you won't be able to say our name," references this.



## Big 'W'

Whittle's wasn't originally intended to be in the Salem Walmart, but was slated for one of the Eugene locations. The issue went all the way to corporate in Arkansas.

In the end, Whittle's could not be opened in the Eugene location, but the Walmart team struck a deal with the restaurant owners to allow them to open at any other Walmart location without a Taco Bell inside. The closest options were Roseburg or Salem.

Girley said the opportunity was "too good to pass up," despite him and the other staff living in Eugene. They had all found each other through

being part of the congregation of the Prayer, Healing and Deliverance Ministry. All of them carpool every day to and from Salem.



The North Salem restaurant opened within Walmart in early September. This date was just shy of the first-year anniversary of their food cart opening in Eugene.

"That's what people ask us the most," Girley said. "They just can't wrap their head around that a restaurant, not a fast food chain, is inside a Walmart — and a Black-owned one, at that."

## **In their own lane**

As Black business owners, Dickerson and Girley are familiar with racism in the industry.

"We have had people come in and post on social media making comments to stop us," Girley said. "When we first opened, we heard (those comments). But when they saw they couldn't stop us, they went and tried to make it harder for us. We just stayed focused and didn't let ourselves get distracted. We don't even hear it anymore."

The duo remain in high spirits, citing their no-nonsense attitude about making quality food. They also thank the community, especially the Black community, for the overwhelming support, from talking up the restaurant to posting across social media.



Girley said a woman came up to the counter and said she was glad her son had an example of a Black man in an ownership role, not just a worker.

"We're not role models, but we do want to be an inspiration," Girley said.

Giving younger people an example of someone who took a chance at business was not part of the plan but inevitably became part of the package.

For the haters in the community, Dickerson and Girley both said they don't care what barbecue other people are making — they don't view themselves as competitors to anyone. The different types of barbecue can coexist, as everyone brings something unique to the barbecue scene in town, the two said.

However, they still maintain they make the best barbecue.

"We're not going anywhere," Girley said, as Dickerson chuckled and shook his head. "We've already signed a five-year lease."



## **Eyes wide, mouths full**

The restaurant serves a wide variety of barbecue cuts. Everything is wood smoked, with each meat paired with a specific type of wood.

The menu includes ribs (half and full slabs), rib tips, chicken legs, chicken thighs, a fourth or half of a chicken, pulled pork, brisket, hot links and meatloaf.

For the holidays, they'll also be offering fried turkey, smoked turkey and smoked ham.





Dickerson and Girley were tight-lipped about the types of wood or even what goes into their seasonings and marinades, emphasizing what they do is always going to be good — if a batch didn't live up to their quality checks, they would throw it away.

"We wouldn't serve you anything we wouldn't serve our mamas," Girley said, chuckling.

He said his mom was a tough critic, and as a kid he would line up among his siblings to be chided if the seasonings weren't perfect.

Non-barbecue items include Louisiana gumbo, macaroni and cheese, barbecue baked beans, potato salad, lemon meringue pie, lemon cake

and banana pudding. Keep your eyes peeled for the launch of smoked salmon and more, coming soon.

For first-time customers, the baby back ribs, barbecue chicken and brisket sandwich are solid options. The mac and cheese and potato salad are the most popular side dishes and what Dickerson said are his favorites.

If you have more questions, Girley and other staff are patient and happy to answer questions. Just don't be surprised if Girley approaches you later, a glimmer in his eye and a proud look on his face, to ask you how the meal was. Your clean plates will do all the talking.

To reach the restaurant, call 541-799-7755, check out the [Facebook page](#), [Instagram account](#), [@whuttlesbbq](#) or [online at whuttles.com](#).

**Hours:** 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday through Saturday.

**Address:** 3025 Lancaster Drive NE, Salem



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