

In Search of a “Pretty Pig”

BY JAMES EARLY JR.

Jason sought the golden fleece, Moses the Promised Land. My quest was to try and find all of the best barbecue places in each of the 100 counties in North Carolina, critique them, and write a book about my findings.

In preparation to write this book, I traveled extensively in all 100 counties of this great state, drove more than 18,000 miles, talked to more than 1,500 people, and critiqued 228 barbecue places in six months. This journey took me from the outer banks to the border of Tennessee. I tried to learn as much as I could about raising hogs, methods of cooking barbecue, various kinds of sauces and dips, and the history of the people who raise the hogs, cook the barbecue, and those privileged to enjoy it.

After completing my journey, I concluded that:

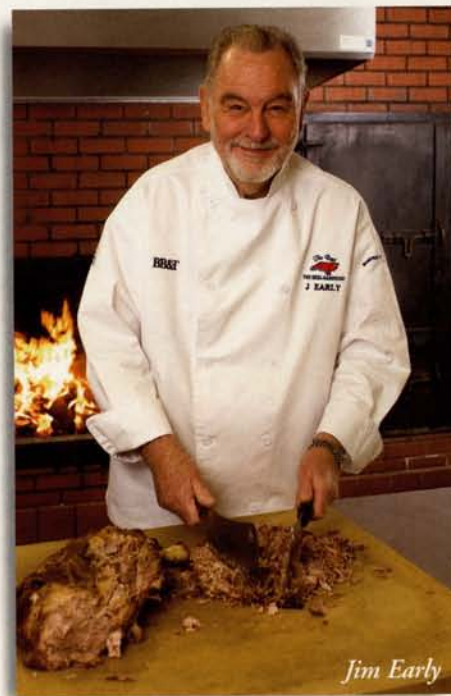
■ **BARBECUE IS COLOR BLIND.** Native Americans shared their method of cooking meat slowly over live coals with white settlers who later shared these skills with blacks who developed and refined these skills in their roles as cooks and barbecue journey-men. The blacks shared some of their cooking skills and secret recipes with whites. Today, whites and blacks share their wonderful slow roasted product with every nationality that makes up this wonderful melting pot we call America.

■ **BARBECUE IS TRADITION.** Those dedicated souls who spend 14-16 hours a day

producing good barbecue take pride in the fact that their place has been in business for 40, 50, or 60 years and that it was founded by their grandparents or parents and is now carried on by the third or fourth generation. Such places with their retro 50's décor seem to take us back to a kinder, gentler time.

■ **BARBECUE IS A BONDING AGENT.** Perhaps more than any other casual dining food, barbecue brings together people of different races, creeds, religions, and socioeconomic levels. Pull into the parking area of any good barbecue place and you will see luxury motorcars, SUVs, pickup trucks, motorcycles, and junkers that barely made it to the lot. Professionals, educators, athletes, skilled and unskilled workers, unemployed, and winos come together to share what may be their only common interest—good barbecue.

■ **BARBECUE IS UNIVERSAL.** Barbecue is found in some form in each of our United States and it is generally found in some form in every country on the planet. People like the taste of slow roasted meat. The animal or critter (or the parts thereof) that produce this treat may not have made our A list, but for a certain group of people in a particular place, it was good barbecue.



I am a trial lawyer who speaks nationally on quality of life, stress management, and the tenants of less is often more. Therefore, I had to find a window that would permit me to do the field research for this project without stringing it out too long, and to continue to serve my clients and keep my speaking engagements. Careful review indicated this was most doable May through October. In May 2001, I commenced a regime of practicing law 40 hours in four days. This usually entailed 14-15 hours a day at the office. On Thursday night I would bail out and drive to the area I intended to work Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, if possible. I would arrive at some small town and find a room around midnight. If I could not find a room, I slept in my Blazer and washed up at a truck stop. At 5:00 a.m. I was up talking to anyone I could find at businesses, truck stops, restaurants, etc. about bar-

becue. The question I posed was, "If your best friend was celebrating a birthday today and wanted to eat barbecue, where in this county would you take them as a treat?" When I had a list of names, I commenced my daily search. As soon as the kitchen staff was in the closest restaurant, so was I. When they were cutting out the lights at the last place I could find that day, I trundled off to yet another small-town motel and repeated this scenario on Saturday. Sunday morning I slept in and returned home to do about five hours of dictation of my notes on Sunday afternoon. Sunday night I crashed. I repeated this scenario every week for over six months.

In an effort to be ethical and fair about critiquing each place, I decided not to eat any meals, snacks, or beverages while on the road. This enabled me to stay constantly hungry and wanting to eat at every place I stopped. I generally could critique three to four places a day. I would order a sample of the barbecue in all the ways that it was served—chopped, coarse chopped, and sliced—along with a tablespoon of slaw, one hushpuppy, and a milkshake cup with water and slices of lemon. I would cleanse my palette with the lemon water before attempting to taste the barbecue. I would then take a bite, taste it like a wine, and write what I experienced. This was followed by more lemon water and repeated with the other styles of barbecue. I tasted the sauces individually with a spoon in the same fashion. I then added sauces on the meat. I tasted the slaw and ate half a hushpuppy. I did not try the side dishes. I ate Altoids between each barbecue place to again freshen my palate.

I was able to stay perpetually hungry all day since I never ate more than several spoonfuls of food and half a hushpuppy at any one place. I did not feel it was fair to the next place I would visit if I had curbed my hunger by eating at the previous place. I also tried to prevent saturating my palate with the barbecue or sauce flavors of the previous place that would impede me from having a fresh taste for the next offering.

I actually lost 15 pounds during the six plus months I did field work for the book. I guess between eating healthy and heart wise four days a week, I inadvertently backed into a mini Adkins diet during my field work. My blood pressure (generally 150) dropped to 132 from the time I had it checked before starting this project until completing it six months later.

Inevitably when people find out that I



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have written this book, they ask the question, "Which is the best in the state?" There is no correct (politically or otherwise) answer to this question. There are a number of good barbecue places across this state. There are barbecue places in some areas that are equally as good as barbecue places in other areas of the state, but their style of cooking and sauces are different—good nonetheless. To be included in my book, a barbecue place had to meet three criteria: (1) it had to cook its own pork; (2) it had

to make its own sauce or dip; and (3) the barbecue, the sauces, the slaw, and hushpuppies (to my taste) had to be GOOD! I made the assumption that if they could cook good barbecue, come up with their own sauce or dip, and fix good slaw and hushpuppies, they could probably come up with good side dishes and desserts as well. People come to barbecue places to eat barbecue, they do not

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The Fun Tribe—*aka* The North Carolina Barbecue Society

BY JAMES EARLY JR.

North Carolina is not only First in Flight, but also the “Cradle of ‘Cue.” We have long

claimed the former, but have been remiss in establishing the latter. It is time we step up as a state and rightfully claim what many of us have known for a long time—that



North Carolina originated barbecue (it's a noun), we produce the BEST, and we are the “Barbecue Capital of the World.”

A number of states and some cities have their own barbecue society. Kansas City has had the Kansas City Barbecue Society (KCBS) for 20 years. It is well known, well run, and has 6,000 members and chapters in all 50 states and a number of foreign countries. North Carolina has never had a barbecue society and we should have had the first. Barbecue started on our eastern shores, it did not start in Kansas City, Texas, Memphis, Chicago or any other place claiming to be a barbecue Mecca.

North Carolina needs a good strong barbecue society to promote our agriculture—nationally and internationally. We are the second largest pork producing entity on the planet. Sampson and Duplin Counties are the two

largest pork producing counties in the world. North Carolina is synonymous with great basketball and great barbecue. Millions of words are written about our basketball, but few writers truly understand our uniqueness in the world of barbecue.

The North Carolina Barbecue Society (NCBS) will have its own bi-monthly newspaper, *The Squealer*, that will be the voice and carry the news of the Tar Heel barbecue world. We will sponsor educational programs at all school levels regarding North Carolina and its barbecue heritage. We will participate in films and documentaries regarding North Carolina's culture and barbecue history. I have already assisted in a film called “Barbecue is a Noun”

that played the River Run Film Festival to wide acclaim and is currently playing at various film festivals nationwide.

NCBS, a non-profit corporation, will support and promote ALL North Carolina barbecue events statewide and assist (if asked) in any way that is appropriate in keeping with its charter purposes. Its goal is to preserve our barbecue heritage and to promote North Carolina as the “Barbecue Capital of the World.”

We need to preserve our barbecue culture and our barbecue heritage. To that end, NCBS will produce videos of the present living pit masters as they work their magic at the pits and capture their wonderful stories, experiences, and grilling methodology, so it will not

be lost with the passage of time. I have also arranged with my friends who are barbecue icons, nationally and internationally, to assist with these videos and add their knowledge, character, and color to this project. With the assistance of others, I have selected 25 of the best barbecue places that are still cooking with wood or charcoal to be designated as Historic Barbecue Pits. These 25 barbecue places would be part of a Historic Barbecue Trail across North Carolina and become part of our tourist industry. The North Carolina Barbecue Society Historic Barbecue Trail is now being considered by several state agencies to be included on their websites as well as that of NCBS.

We hope to have minorities again involved in North Carolina barbecue. Fifty to 60 years ago, all of the barbecue places or joints were mom and pop operations with the kids assisting after school. About half or more of these mom and pop operations were owned and operated by minorities. Minorities have played a significant role in the development of North Carolina's agriculture products—in particular barbecue. When I did the field research for my book *The Best Tar Heel Barbecue Manteo to Murphy*, I went to all 100 counties in an effort to find the best barbecue in all the counties in the state. I critiqued 228 barbecue places in my efforts and found only six minority owned and operated barbecue places on my journey. There may have been others, but I did not hear of them or find them. Almost all of the pit masters that I met were minorities, but the businesses were not owned by minorities and only a few of the businesses were owned and

operated by women.

In our effort to preserve our state's heritage, culture, traditions, and those things that set us apart from other states, we would link up with the Slow movement that is already well established in Europe and in the US. The Slow movement is designed to preserve the traditional ways of doing things such as making wines, cheeses, etc. that have historical significance to particular areas. Barbecue is a significant part of our culture. Very few places are still cooking with wood or charcoal over open pits. The stories, the methodology of cooking, and the folklore retained by the present living pit masters will be gone if not preserved in some fashion for future generations to enjoy. Most of these men are in their 60's and have been applying their trade for 25-30 years. In all likelihood, at their deaths, many if not most will be replaced with electric or gas cookers. We need to preserve this body of knowledge and we need to train young pit masters to carry on this tradition.

It is the goal of NCBS to promote events like the Tar Heel Barbecue Classic. The Classic would start as a two-day event for the public and hopefully become a three, four, or five day event much akin to Memphis in May and be held in conjunction with hot air balloon festivals, World War II war bird fly-ins, music festivals, rodeos, horse shows, sports events, etc. In addition to promoting existing barbecue festivals, NCBS would also promote the best beach party on the east coast on an annual basis. This event would take place in early fall. It would be called the Lost Barbecue Party and produced at or near Manteo on the outer banks.

North Carolina needs the North Carolina Barbecue Society and NCBS needs the help of men and women with vision, high energy levels, a penchant for thinking outside the box, and a passion to promote this great state. We need the help of state agencies who are in a position to assist with this project as well as various chambers of commerce across this state and those service organizations that could provide "worker bees" necessary to bring NCBS and all it would represent to the people of North Carolina and our visitors from out-of-state.

Membership in NCBS is only \$35.00 per year. Membership would entitle one to a membership card, certificate, window decal, and bimonthly issues of *The Squealer*, the voice of NCBS. Other benefits would be preferred status for grilling/cooking classes, BBQ judge training, etc. along with direct input to the NCBS Board as to where members would like their society to go and how they would like for it to get there. Lawyers have always had a sense of history and have taken the lead in movements that mattered. If only one-third of the North Carolina State Bar members were to join NCBS we would be the size of the largest barbecue society our first year.

Please contact NCBS at (336) 768-2547 or Jim@jimearly.com for a membership application. We need some of your time, energy, and funds to further the goals of NCBS (aka "The Fun Tribe") to wit: to cook and eat barbecue as often as possible, preferably in the company of good friends, and to promote the Old North State as the "Cradle of 'Cue."

Keep the fires burning! ■

Pretty Pig (cont.)

come because of banana pudding. If a place has good sides and desserts, that's a plus but that's not what brings 'em in and brings 'em back.

For me, barbecue generally falls into two categories—good and not so good. Good on a scale from 1-10 can range from 5-10. A number of the places that I critiqued (to my taste) would fall in the 5-6 range, meaning GOOD. Some of the places I critiqued (to my taste) would fall in the 7-8 range, meaning BETTER. A few (to my taste) would fall in the 9-10 range, meaning BEST. Every barbecue place included in the book is not

as good as every other barbecue place included in the book. Every barbecue place included in the book is, however, the best (to my taste) I was able to find in that particular area.

I hope each reader of my book can vicariously experience my journey as I attempted to ferret out the best barbecue places in the Tar Heel State. Did I find them all? No! And if I failed to find a "treasure" that you know about, please share that information.

The journey that produced *The Best Tar Heel Barbecue Manteo to Murphy* carried all of my senses to new heights and fed my soul as well. Beyond the good food and beauty of rural North Carolina, the thing that made

this adventure shine for me was the people. The outpouring of friendship that I experienced, the warmth, the fellowship, and the laughter will be with me all my days. The book can be purchased at Border's Bookstores or ordered online at www.jimearly.com. Monies from this book are shared with Special Olympics North Carolina. ■

Jim Early is a practicing lawyer, international hunting and fishing tour guide, professional seminar speaker, and author of several books and numerous articles on Southern cooking and barbecue. Jim is the father of three children and calls Winston-Salem home.