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MONTHLY

OCTOBER 2009

the



quest

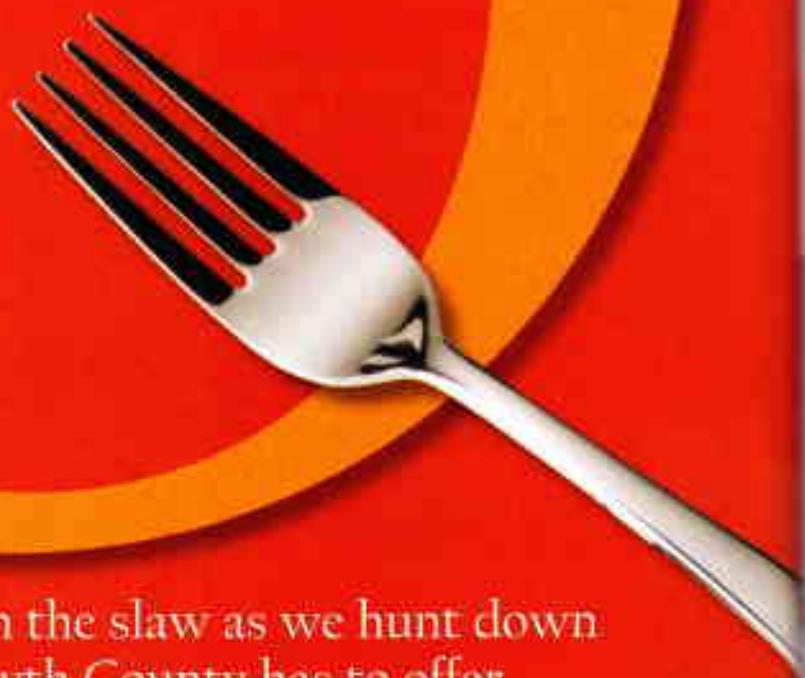
*In a place known
for barbecue,
we hunt down the best*



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the

Quest



Put on your bib and pile on the slaw as we hunt down
the best barbecue Forsyth County has to offer.

BY MICHAEL BREEDLOVE

ILLUSTRATION BY KYLE WEBSTER / PHOTOS BY J. SINCLAIR



NORTH CAROLINA

With apologies to Texas, Memphis, and everywhere else in America, North Carolina is the true barbecue capital of the world.

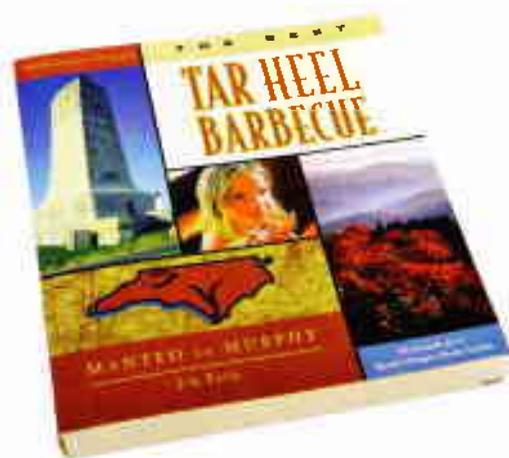
While this statement is neither verified nor invalid, it's one that many North Carolinians deem as truth. The Tarheel state is, after all, the second-largest pork-producing state in the country. It has two distinct styles — Eastern and Lexington — and features barbecue joints in all 100 of its counties. Beyond that, North Carolina has something no other state can claim. That something is Jim Early.

A Winston-Salem resident and former trial lawyer, Early wears the hats of hunting guide, gourmet chef, and inspirational speaker. More than anything, though, he's a barbecue junkie. A few years back, Early went on a quest of gastronomical proportions. He traversed the entire state — from the sands of the Outer Banks to the peaks of the Great Smokies — in search of the best barbecue.

In the end, Early had eaten at 228

barbecue joints, racking up 22,000 miles in the process. He compiled his notes into a book he titled *The Best Tar Heel Barbecue: Murphy to Manteo*. If barbecue is a religion in North Carolina, then this book might as well be the bible.

After its release, Early decided to close his law office and devote his professional life to barbecue. He founded the North Carolina Barbecue Society, an organization that seeks to promote North Carolina as "the cradle of Q." While the society's Winston-Salem base sits just north of Lexington — the West's rallying point in the statewide barbecue war — Early claims to have a mutual love for both styles. He moved to Winston-Salem from northeast North Carolina, bringing a love of Eastern-style 'cue with him. "I try not to perpetuate a war," he says. "I'd rather bring about a wedding."



Like Early, I've got a shared respect for both styles of 'cue. Growing up in Davidson County, I spent many nights chowing down at Speedy's, Kerley's, and other Lexington standbys. I consider the Barbecue Festival — happening October 24 — the premier food event in the state. Maybe even the world.

But then came college at NC State, and with it, a tradition that seemed to amend every rule my Davidson County upbringing taught me. Saturdays in the fall meant tailgating, and railgating in Raleigh meant Eastern-style barbecue. Initially, I'd watch in horror as my roommates would slow-cook a pig for hours, then cover it with a vinegar sauce. "They're ruining it," I'd think to myself. "These crazy Easterners are ruining everything!"

But somewhere along the line, Eastern style actually became bearable. Heck, it became good. That's why Early's book — aided by his unbiased palate — speaks to me.

With the book as a guide, I decided to undertake a similar "Q" quest, albeit on a much smaller scale. While Early ate at over 200 restaurants, I went to around 10. While he spent 4,000 hours on the road, I spent about four. Regardless, we were both left with the same ringing conclusion — North Carolina is indeed the barbecue capital of the world.

For more, go to ncbbqsociety.com.



Little Richard's Bar-B-Que

4885 Country Club Rd.

With spots in Clemmons, Wallburg, Yadkinville, and Mt.

Airy, it's hard to go anywhere in northwest North Carolina and not spot a Little Richard's. But if you're looking to try the original, head to Country Club Road.

That's where you'll find "Little Richard" Berrier and his crew, pit-cooking their pork over wood flames.

Berrier opened Little Richard's in 1991, combining his restaurant management experience with his pit-cooking precision. He got his start in barbecue back in his teen years.

"Barbecuing is a talent you've either got or you don't," he says. "It's like painting or fixing cars. I can't paint, and I can only halfway fix up cars, but I can cook barbecue."

If you need proof, just grab a chopped sandwich and pour on the sauce. The pork has a moist consistency and a hearty, smoke-laced taste. Meanwhile, the sauce's spicy/tangy flavor seems to bring out the best in the meat.

Aside from the barbecue, the hushpuppies have an incredible sweet-onion taste, while the sweet tea will likely send you into a sugar-induced state of ecstasy. Berrier attributes the tea's distinctively sweet taste to a secret hand-brewed method of rapid cooling.

More than the taste, Little



LEFT: The perfect meal: A chopped sandwich with slaw, hushpuppies, and sweet tea. ABOVE: For more information on Jim Early's book, go to jimearly.com.



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Richard's just feels like a barbecue joint, right down to the accepted payment methods (cash only).

The business had a scare in 2000 when an electrical fire forced the staff to close for months while they refurbished the site. When the doors opened back up, regulars were happy to see the place had hardly changed at all.

That "don't change" mentality still echoes throughout Little Richard's today. Oldies still ring out from a corner jukebox, vintage tins still line the walls, and regulars still squeeze into their favorite booths. Recently, the spot was highlighted on ESPN during a Wake Forest football game, reflecting the citywide affinity for this down-home shack.

INFO: 760-3457; eatmopig.com
HOURS: Mon-Sat, 11 a.m.–9 p.m.
MUST TRYs: The sweet tea was our favorite of the lot, and the hushpuppies are can't-miss

Bib's Downtown

675 W. Fifth St.

Ask pitmaster Mark Little about the pulled pork sandwich at Bib's, and he's quick to recite the restaurant's motto: "It's not Eastern or Western ... it's Besern." True, Bib's isn't North Carolina barbecue. The smoked meats are closer to something you'd find in West Texas, nor the Central Piedmont. In fact, you won't even find the word "barbecue" on the menu. That said, Bib's makes one heck of a pulled pork sandwich. While including them might seem to stretch the barbecue boundaries, excluding them would be equally unfitting.

Little opened Bib's last December with partners Robert Moreau and Ricky Seamon. The guys picked the old Firestone auto care location on Fifth Street as their locale, spicing up the industrial aesthetic with orange and yellow paint, patio dining, and flat-screen TVs. As for the name, Little says it came from his devotion to bib overalls. "I wear them every day," he says, laughing.

When ordering, you can see Little's prominent red cooker looming just behind the counter. It's this cooker that gives the meat a delicious smoky flavor.

"It's the only one of its kind on the East Coast," he says proudly.

Little likes to go big with his sandwiches. He piles a quarter-pound of pork onto a thick Kaiser bun, creating a Goliath of a sandwich that's a battle to the finish (a battle I lost, sadly). If you can't finish it, don't fret. It's great reheated the next day, too.

Along with the meat, Bib's side items are equally praiseworthy. Winners include the five-bean Bib's beans and the twice-fried, perfectly seasoned fries. If you've only got room for one, though, make sure it's the hushpuppies. They feature a thick, crunchy crust and a sweet, peppery flavor — likely the result of the 13 spices used in the making.

Food isn't the only reason Bib's has become one of downtown's



Stationed across from the Central Library, Bib's has quickly become one of downtown's favorite stops. ABOVE: Richard Berner of Little Richard's preparing the barbecue.





favorite lunch stops. The restaurant operates in a friendly, light-speed manner, meaning downtown workers can get in and out in no time. "We sometimes turn out 300 plates in a span of three hours," Little says. "We pride ourselves on keeping things fresh and keeping it fast."

INFO: 722-0007, bibsdowntown.com

HOURS: Mon-Sat, 11 a.m.-10 p.m.

MUST TRYs: The fries, beans, and especially the hushpuppies. We've also heard the brisket is excellent.

Prissy Polly's Bar-B-Que

729 NC Highway 66 South, Kernersville

Greg Whaley knows his family's Kernersville joint stirs up a good bit of controversy among barbecue purists. He knows that serving Lexington- and Eastern-style barbecue is like cheering for Duke and UNC (or Wake, or State). But he also knows that if the food's good, people will come. And come they do.

Whaley's father, Loran, opened Prissy Polly's in 1991 as the first Eastern-style barbecue joint in the Triad. The name comes from a nickname given to his mother, Pauline. While the initial public response was positive, Whaley started noticing an interesting trend: Many diners would

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order an Eastern-style sandwich and then cover it with a tomato-based sauce. To appease these folks, Prissy Polly's decided to add its own Lexington-style concoction to the menu. "I think we're the only spot in the state that serves both kinds of barbecue," he says.

These days, Whaley runs Prissy Polly's with his wife, Deborah, and his younger brother, Gary. If you order a barbecue sandwich, the person behind the counter will ask you what style you'd like. Surprisingly, the number of Lexington- and Eastern-style sandwiches served is "just about dead-even," according to Whaley.

To change things up, I decided to sample their Eastern style. As imagined, it came doused in a vinegar sauce and accented with white slaw. Prissy Polly's strays from authentic Eastern style in that they only cook pork shoulders — not whole hogs. Regardless, a few bites took me back to the tailgating scene at Carter-Finley stadium. In the midst of eating, I could have sworn I heard the faint howl of a wolf in the distance.

Along with the barbecue, there's plenty of variety in the side items.

Surprisingly, the number of Lexington- and Eastern-style sandwiches served is "just about dead-even," according to Whaley.

Red bliss potatoes, cooked cabbage, and fried squash complement fries, hushpuppies, and the rest of the usual offerings.

The vibrant venue — with its wooden picnic tables and red-checkered tablecloths — also deviates from standard barbecue shacks. On-the-go diners will appreciate the drive-thru window, while music fans will love the bluegrass bands on Thursday and Saturday nights.

Add everything up, and you've got a one-of-a-kind barbecue joint that isn't afraid to bend the rules.

"We try and accommodate everyone's tastes," Whaley says. "It causes some controversy sometimes, we know. But we welcome that."

INFO: 993-5045; prissypollys.com
HOURS: Mon-Sat, 11 a.m.–8:30 p.m.
MUST TRYs: Whichever style of barbecue you didn't try the first time. The ring-shaped hushpuppies were a big hit, too.

MORE MUST TRYs

CLARK'S BARBECUE: Kernersville's second hotspot, Clark's, has everything you look for in a barbecue joint: old-fashioned ambience, friendly service, and great-tasting barbecue. 1331 NC Highway 66 South, Kernersville. 996-8644.

MR. BARBECUE: A stalwart of the local restaurant scene, Mr. Barbecue has been serving up tasty Lexington-style 'cue since the early 1960s. While barbecue is the main attraction, we can't help but love the jumbo-sized cups of sweet tea. 1381 Peters Creek Pkwy. 725-7827.

PIG-N-OUT BARBECUE: Although it won the *Winston-Salem Journal's* Reader's Choice Award in 2008, Pig-N-Out still seems to be somewhat of a hidden jewel in town. With great food and neighborly service, this is a place everyone should know about. 5954 University Pkwy, 768-2546.

Due to space and time constraints, we weren't able to cover every local barbecue joint in this story (believe us, we tried). If we left off your favorite place to eat, let us know! Go to winstonsalemmonthly.com and send us an E-mail.



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Hill's Barbecue

1005 Patterson Ave.

There's a somewhat objective system I use to measure the friendliness of a wait staff. I call it the sweetie scale. Anytime a waitress calls me "sweetie" or "darlin'" or (insert term of endearment), I make a note of it.

I haven't made all my rounds yet, but I'd imagine nowhere is going to match Hill's on the sweetie scale. I eventually quit counting, but had I not, I'm pretty sure it would've ended up in the triple digits. But the thing is, all of the "sweeties" are genuine — as is the rest of the restaurant.

With its quaint decor and exposed-brick walls, Hill's feels less like a barbecue joint and more like your favorite grandma's house.

For \$6.99, you can get a heap of chopped barbecue, hushpuppies, and a choice of side. At the recommendation of the wait staff, I went with the potato salad. All of it was incredible, just as I suspected.

I talked with J.R. Hill, resident pitmaster at Hill's. His grandparents, Joe and Edna, opened Hill's in 1951. The business was then handed over to their son, Gene, J.R.'s father.

Since opening, Hill's has claimed to be the "original" Lexington barbecue. You see, Lexington had a few barbecue joints before Hill's opened, but none actually called it "Lexington-style." Hill's gave the style a name and brought it to Winston-Salem.

"We're not Lexington-style," Hill says, "We are Lexington barbecue."

As for the restaurant's longevity, J.R. says it's a simple combination of good people and great food.

"We're a family-owned business that runs off of hardworking people and home-cooked meals. Always have been, always will be."

MORE INFO: 767-2184

OPEN: Tue-Sun, 7 a.m. - 9 p.m.

MUST TRYs: The hushpuppies and potato salad. At breakfast, make sure you try the toast.

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CLEARING THE SMOKE

Eating nothing but barbecue for a week will teach you a few things. So will reading every page of Jim Early's book. The following are a few insights I picked up along my short, but stuffing barbecue chase.

- There's no such thing as a barbecue restaurant, barbecue café, or a barbecue bistro. If a place in North Carolina is known for its pork, it's a barbecue joint.
- Most people point to sauce and slaw as the biggest differences in Lexington and Eastern style, but often overlook the meat. Lexington-style pitmasters cook only pork shoulders, where Eastern-style chefs slow cook the whole hog.
- That tangy, burnt-red concoction you're putting on your Lexington-style barbecue isn't sauce. If you're near the Davidson County line, it's called dip.
- Eating barbecue without hushpuppies is like eating a hamburger without fries. It's acceptable, but it's highly inadvisable.
- Speaking of hushpuppies, they don't seem to exist too far outside the Carolinas. The reason is baffling. Here's a food that's delicious and easy to make (they're just deep-fried cornmeal balls). Whatever the reason, I hope it stays that way.
- Parking lots at barbecue joints are fascinating places. It's there you'll see luxury sedans parked next to rusty pickups parked next to mini-vans parked next to motorcycles. As Early likes to say, barbecue is the "All-American casual food."

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