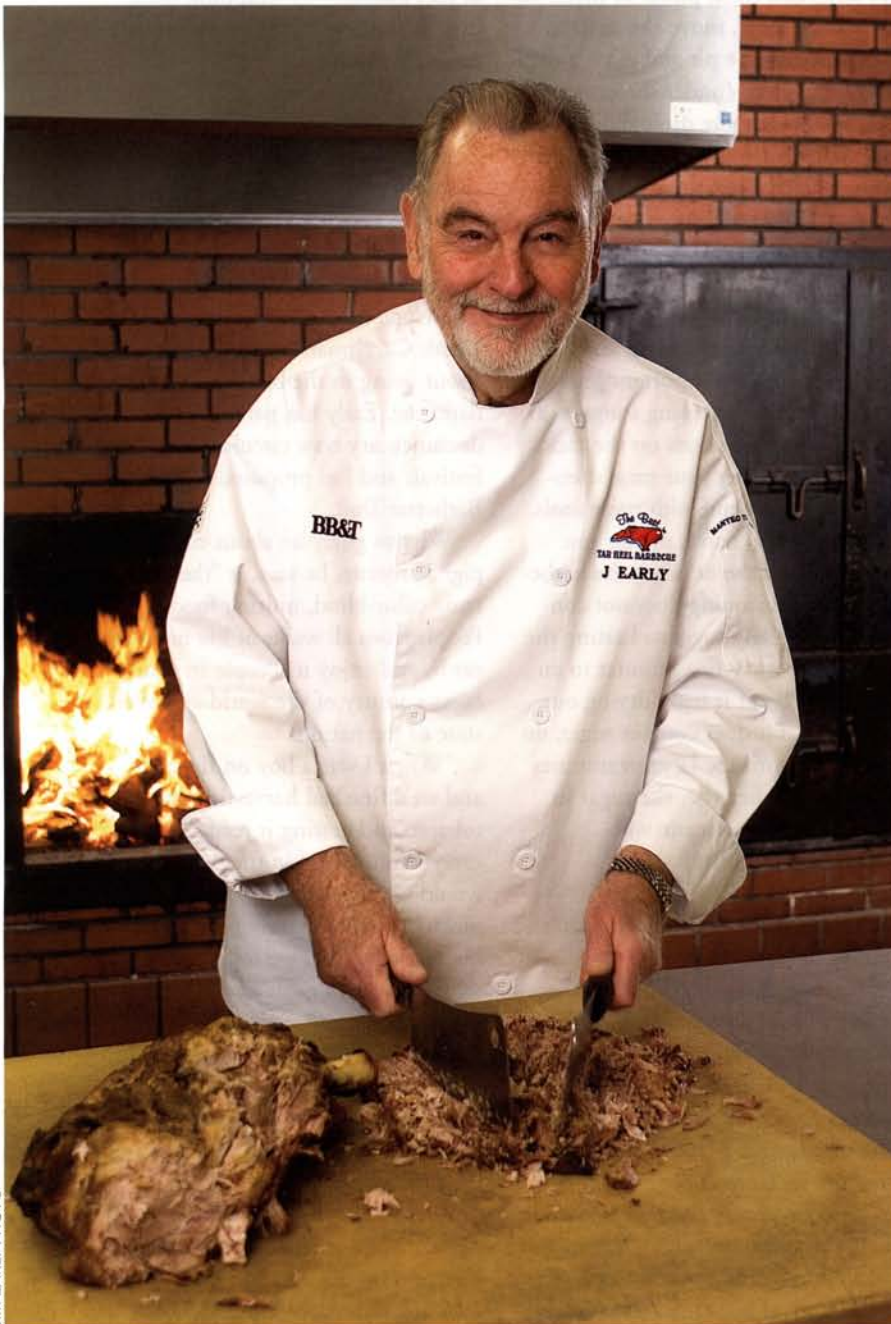


RIGHT ON 'CUE

Tips from a connoisseur of barbecue, as a noun and a verb



JIM EARLY PHOTO

Jim Early is a practicing lawyer, international hunting and fishing tour guide, professional seminar speaker, and author of three books on Southern gastronomy.

"In some circles I'm known as a chef," says Early with a mischievous smile, "but I just call myself a damn fine cook." The Winston-Salem native is the author of *The Best Tar Heel Barbecue: Manteo to Murphy* (self-published, 2002). We could think of nobody better to give advice on at-home barbecue than Early, who spent six months and eighteen thousand miles compiling the best that North Carolina, the "Cradle of 'Cue," has to offer.

Be your own pit master

A key to successful barbecue is knowing your fire, Early says. Since barbecue (as a noun) is meat slow roasted over an open flame, getting the coals just right is crucial. Early suggests coals that are eighty percent ash, which should take thirty to forty-five minutes after lighting to achieve.

Also, deciding whether to cook with direct or indirect heat will determine how the coals should be arranged. Direct heat is a typical cookout method, with coals evenly distributed under the rack. Indirect heat, though it takes longer, is better

Jim Early gets right to the meat of things as food writer and barbecue lover.

Why so gung-ho about cooking a pig? Barbecue, Early says, is “the only truly color-blind, uniting food. People from all walks of life make it, eat it, and enjoy it. People in nearly every country of the world and every state of the nation.”

for large and thick pieces of meat. To slow-roast meat, move the coals to either side of the pit and place a drip pan in between (under the center of the rack, where the meat should be placed). Follow the usual guidelines about internal meat temperature to ensure doneness, no matter the method.

Juicy secrets

Never turn meat with a fork. To prevent losing all-important juices, Early recommends using tongs or a spatula to rotate meats on the rack.

But protecting your meat's tenderness doesn't end with mere tools. The marinade, sauce, or rub you choose can make or break the barbecue. If the seasoning does not contain sugar, Early suggests basting the meat every forty-five minutes to an hour to prevent it from drying out. However, if it does contain sugar, do not apply until the last few minutes of grilling; otherwise, the sugar in your sauce or marinade will caramelize and burn.

Size matters — particularly with brisket

The bigger the beef brisket, the better it is for slow roasting. The heavy layer of fat should be trimmed to about a quarter-inch. Early also advises scoring the fatty edge every one to one-and-a-half inches to prevent the fat from curling.

Steaks typically cook to perfection if they're about one and a half inches thick. You would do well to protect the quality of less fatty steaks, such

as filet mignon, by wrapping them in a “fake” layer of fat — bacon does the trick nicely.

High Society

Early's latest barbecue-related endeavor is the North Carolina Barbecue Society. The goal is to support already existing barbecue festivals around the state, perhaps charter a new one or two, and generally get North Carolinians excited and proud about living in the birthplace of U.S. barbecue. Early has participated in a documentary now circulating at film festivals and has proposed a Historic Barbecue Trail.

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“When I was a boy on the farm, and we'd finished harvesting the tobacco and getting it ready for sale, everyone involved in the process would get together for a big pig pickin'. It was the only time that blacks and whites ate together.”

The society's goals also include supporting barbecue-pit ownership by women and minorities. Although both groups are integral to N.C. barbecue heritage, few women and minorities actually own and operate their own businesses.

—Erin Etheridge

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