

# book | *news*

from North Carolina

**The University of North Carolina Press**

116 S. Boundary St. | Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27514-3808

**A conversation with John Shelton Reed, Dale Volberg Reed, and William McKinney**

Authors of *Holy Smoke: The Big Book of North Carolina Barbecue*

Published November 1, 2008

\$30.00 hardcover, ISBN 978-0-8078-3243-1

**Q: How did two Tennesseans (John and Dale) and a South Carolinian (William) get the nerve to write a book about North Carolina barbecue? What qualifies you to write on the topic?**

**Dale:** Well, John and I are originally from just over the line in Tennessee and we've lived in North Carolina since 1969—and I was at Duke before that. But you're right: we're not Tar Heels born and Tar Heels bred. As we say in the introduction to the book, we're converts to North Carolina barbecue, but like many converts we can be more Catholic than the Pope. Because we didn't grow up with it, we don't take North Carolina barbecue for granted.

**John:** We also argue—I don't know how successfully—that our origins give us some measure of impartiality in the Eastern Piedmont, tomato vs. no-tomato, whole-hog vs. shoulder wars. It's not *our* heritage that's at stake.

**William:** On the South Carolina front, I'll freely admit to being fond of mustard-based barbecue—really fond of it. But the intensity of interest in barbecue and respect for it that you find in North Carolina doesn't exist where I come from. Good barbecue places in South Carolina will carry Eastern-style sauce, but North Carolina shops don't need mustard-based sauce. In fact, it would be weird if you found it in a North Carolina barbecue joint.

**Q: How is *Holy Smoke* organized?**

**John:** You could call it Trinitarian. The first part is history (starting with the *Iliad*—no kidding) and what you might call “lore.” We talk about the role of barbecue and *barbecues* in the life of the state, and the rise of barbecue restaurants in the twentieth century. The second part of the book tells how to cook barbecue at home, and gives the history of the canonical side dishes—slaw, cornbread, Brunswick stew, and other things you'll find on the menus of North Carolina barbecue places. (We've got some good recipes, too.) The last third or so is made up of interviews William did with a dozen or so representative “barbecue men” (and one woman—Debbie Bridges, from Shelby). These are folks who cook barbecue for a living, and they talk about their craft, and their businesses, and their lives. We conclude with a sort of coda about the future of North Carolina barbecue, why it may be an endangered cuisine, and why that matters.

**Q: How did this project come to be?**

**Dale:** John and I have admired and cooked from a book called *Legends of Texas Barbecue* by Robb Walsh ever since we came across it. We were talking one day with David Perry [editor-

[more]

## 2-2-2 Holy Smoke: The Big Book of North Carolina Barbecue

in-chief at UNC Press] and found out that he liked it, too. Someone—we don't remember who—said, “You know, there really needs to be a book like that about *North Carolina* barbecue.” John and I looked at each other and knew what our next book was going to be. We wrote a proposal for David and the Press bought it.

**John:** It turned out that we'd been getting ready to write this book for a long time, without knowing it. We'd been eating barbecue all over the state—and, for that matter, out-of-state, from San Francisco to London—for decades. We'd studied Bob Garner's and Jim Early's books on North Carolina barbecue—in fact, we had them in our car, and had done things like driving from Chapel Hill to Goldsboro for lunch. I'd been a judge at the Memphis in May barbecue competition and had written about that. I'd spoken about the cultural importance of barbecue at a meeting of the Southern Foodways Alliance, and I'd written a few magazine columns on the subject. We knew enough to know that it would take a whole encyclopedia to deal with barbecue in general, but that it might be barely possible to write a single book about North Carolina. We knew that William had already done those interviews, as a project for the SFA, so we asked him if he'd join us.

### **Q: Just what is North Carolina barbecue, anyway?**

**John:** Well, it's not just whatever's served in North Carolina and called barbecue, that's for sure. We start the book with a definition: whole hogs, pork shoulders, or (occasionally) hams, cooked over hardwood coals for a long time at a temperature about that of boiling water, and served with a thin sauce containing vinegar, peppers, maybe (or maybe not) tomato, and not much else. This is a tradition that has evolved a bit—not much—over time, and we think it should be cherished and respected.

**William:** North Carolina barbecue is intensely local, with variations from one part of the state to another (the differences between the East and the Piedmont are especially hot, of course). But Tar Heels cook shoulders or whole hogs—no collars, tenderloins, or ribs, thank you—and serve the meat with a sauce that's only a slight twist, if that, on some time-honored recipe. At its best and most traditional, there are no short cuts. It's burning hardwood for coals, slowly cooking pigs through the night, chopping the meat on a wood block hollowed out by cleavers over time, and serving it in a stand, joint, or restaurant that's often the center of the community.

### **Q: What's the difference between Piedmont and Eastern style barbecue?**

**William:** Most folks who'll be interested in this book probably already know that Eastern-style is a whole hog—usually a young one—doused with a sauce of vinegar and hot pepper, while the Piedmont has embraced the tomato in its sauce and forsaken the whole hog for the shoulder.

**Dale:** That's *generally* true, although we found some Eastern places that cook shoulders and some Piedmont places that don't put tomato in their sauces.

**John:** As Bob Garner and many others have pointed out, though, Eastern- and Piedmont-style are actually a lot more like each other than either is like what you'll get in Memphis or Kansas

[more]

Contact Gina Mahalek for review copies/author interviews [919] 962-0581

Fax [919] 966-3829 | E-mail: Gina\_Mahalek@unc.edu

### **3-3-3 Holy Smoke: The Big Book of North Carolina Barbecue**

City or Texas. One friend from Georgia says that North Carolina ought to call itself “the Vinegar State.” Still, folks get heated up about these relatively small intra-state differences. As Jerry Bledsoe says, the feud is as good as the food. We talk some in the book about why North Carolinians enjoy this fight so much.

#### **Q: Why are North Carolinians so devoted to pork? Has it always been so?**

**John:** When William Byrd visited our parts from Virginia in the 1720s he wrote about North Carolinians as a “porcivorous” people whose “only business . . . is raising of hogs, which is managed with the least trouble, and affords the diet they are most fond of.” But Byrd was an aristocrat: pork was the usual fare for most ordinary Southerners, not just North Carolinians. In the 1850s two hogs were raised each year for every person in the South, and (except in Texas and Kentucky) “barbecue” came to mean some kind of pigmeat. That said, we were surprised to find that even in North Carolina, beef and mutton were often cooked alongside pork at community barbecues and on special occasions until quite recently. It was only in the middle of the last century that Tar Heels got dogmatic about the kind of meat that should be barbecued.

#### **Q: How were each of you introduced to North Carolina barbecue?**

**Dale:** When I was a student at Duke in the early '60s I was introduced to Turnage's Barbecue, on Morreene Road in Durham, and when John came to visit we always ate there. They cooked Eastern-style, chopped it where you could see (and hear) it, and served it family-style at long tables. They had Kay Kiser's old piano, and Kay Kiser's old piano player used to play while you ate. The food was terrific. We didn't have anything like it in Tennessee.

**William:** Eastern-style sauce is called Pee Dee-style in South Carolina, after the area where it's found. I remember eating it at my great-uncle's house in Pamplico. I thought it wasn't very good, and I'd get seconds of chicken bog instead. I was young, unwise, and immature, and came to see the error of my ways at UNC, where I discovered in my sophomore year that I could drive to Allen & Son, eat a meal, and get back in thirty minutes.

#### **Q: William, you mention starting the Carolina Barbecue Society (CBS) as a UNC student in the late 1990s. What was the group's purpose? What happened at its meetings?**

**William:** I established CBS in 2001 because a group of us thought it was a great way for students and faculty to come together and learn about different parts of the state. We brought in speakers—including one Professor John Shelton Reed—to talk about how barbecue is involved in North Carolina's culture, heritage, communities, and politics. MTV's College Network even came to one of our meetings in Durham to watch us get barbecue sauce all over our faces.

#### **Q: One of *Holy Smoke's* most extraordinary features is its interviews with heroes of North Carolina barbecue. How difficult was it to get these barbecue men and women to share their secrets for, and to speak candidly about, the challenges they face preparing great barbecue? Do you think that their particular traditions will be carried on?**

**William:** I'd met a number of them already, and the fact that they knew we cared about their  
[more]

#### **4-4-4 Holy Smoke: The Big Book of North Carolina Barbecue**

traditions and methods was helpful. Still, there were a number of interviews where after twenty or thirty minutes, they really started to open up and share their secrets, which really all boil down to one thing: an unusual capacity for hard work. Anyone willing to fire up coals and tend the grills through the night for years on end can be a pit master. Some of the people I interviewed had parents in the business and some have children working for them now, but whether these traditions will carry on isn't an easy question. There are a number of obstacles in their path: finding wood, keeping a steady workforce, maintaining quality, and keeping prices reasonable. We certainly hope and believe that North Carolina barbecue will continue, and that people will continue to appreciate what it is these people do for the state.

#### **Q: What aspects of barbecue are endangered today?**

**William:** Wood-cooking, most obviously. The real old-fashioned method is to burn down seasoned wood into coals and sprinkle them into the barbecue pits, which is how most of the people I interviewed still do it. But wood's hard to source and expensive, and it takes more attention to keep the heat in the proper range, so when barbecue places switch from cooking with hardwood coals to cooking with gas and electricity—as a great many, including some of the oldest and best-known, have done—it's easy to understand why. But it's still unacceptable.

**Dale:** Most new places these days are using some sort of hybrid gas-and-wood or electric-and-wood cooker. If you just use the gas or electricity for ignition and to regulate the temperature you don't lose much flavor (just some soul). But there's always the temptation to use the gas or electricity for cooking—and there goes that inimitable taste.

**John:** There's another threat as well—at least we see it as a threat. That's tarting barbecue up with culinary school touches like innovative sauces and rubs, and serving it in high-toned restaurants that talk about their “concept.” People shouldn't get too posh—much less playful and postmodern—with barbecue. Jim Shahin says, “Barbecue was not meant to be all dressed up. It is a proletarian food, and its upscaling will be its undoing.” Shahin's a Texan, but he knows what he's talking about. When we see a barbecue place with a choice of sauces—much less one with valet parking—we start out suspicious.

#### **Q: How profitable is the barbecue business? Do profit margins go up when one cooks with gas? What's wrong with cooking with gas, anyway?**

**John:** Plenty of people make a comfortable living from barbecue, but only a very few get rich from it, and most of those do it by cutting corners—like cooking with gas, which can save you some money, sure, but produces an inferior product—consistent, often pretty good, but not great.

**William:** Lots of people worship at the Church of Sauce, but real barbecuing is more like the worship of Ba'al—cooking over coals, where the fat cooks out of the pork, sizzles onto the coals, and makes the smoke that gives you that barbecue taste. Sauce is fine and can perk up the meat, but the essence of barbecue lies in that process. Pork cooked in a gas oven can turn out pretty good, but it's not barbecue.

[more]

Contact Gina Mahalek for review copies/author interviews [919] 962-0581

Fax [919] 966-3829 | E-mail: Gina\_Mahalek@unc.edu

## 5-5-5 Holy Smoke: The Big Book of North Carolina Barbecue

**Q: How much exploration in barbecue do you encourage? Should I try the ribs at my favorite joint if I swear by the sandwich with a side of fried okra? Should I “save room for dessert” if I really want a plate with onion rings? Should I go across town and try someplace new from time to time?**

**William:** One of the Carolina Barbecue Society events was a Down East BarBQ Extravaganza where we drove through Eastern North Carolina and stopped at four or five restaurants in one afternoon. That’s not something to do everyday, but you should certainly drive that extra mile—or twenty—to check out a barbecue place you’ve heard about. By the way, if you’re getting sides of fried okra and have the option of ribs, you may not be at a real North Carolina barbecue restaurant. Most of them don’t serve ribs or fried okra—or, for that matter, succotash, hoppin’ john, or brisket. (Not that there’s anything wrong with those dishes.) Some of our favorite places do only barbecue, slaw, and cornbread—maybe boiled potatoes and Brunswick stew. Samuel Jones of the Skylight Inn said it best: “When you come here, it’s not what you want, it’s how much of it.” You go to these places for the barbecue. What’s great is how divergent that barbecue and those places can be.

**John:** We’ve really enjoyed exploring the state’s traditional barbecue restaurants, and, as Will says, there are a lot of variations on the common theme. But when you find a place that takes the trouble to do it right you should treasure it and support it. Sure, check out that new place that sells Texas- or Memphis-style—it might be good eating—but week-in, week-out, North Carolinians ought to eat North Carolina barbecue, like Italians eat pasta.

**Q: How did you decide what recipes to include, and where did you get them?**

**John:** We put in recipes for dishes that you’re likely to find in North Carolina barbecue restaurants—slaw, hushpuppies, and Brunswick stew, of course, but also side dishes and desserts served by a good many places. We wanted folks to be able to reconstruct the experience at home, insofar as that’s possible.

**Dale:** The recipes came from friends and family, from our collection of historic Southern cookbooks, and from more recent cookbooks (often written by our friends—we’re lucky to know a lot of food writers). We’ve tried to give some idea of where these dishes came from and how they’ve evolved.

**Q: What should I do when my favorite restaurant closes up for the holidays? Can I freeze barbecue to get me through these lean times?**

**William:** Your favorite barbecue restaurant may not close. Many restaurants’ busiest season is around the holidays. That’s one of the evocative things about barbecue; people in North Carolina have long associated it with holidays and special occasions. But frozen barbecue works in a pinch.

**Dale:** Actually, in the book we recommend putting leftover barbecue in plastic bags sealed with one of those vacuum-sealing gizmos and freezing that. When you’re ready for some barbecue, you can put the bag in simmering water for an hour or two and bring the meat up to 180 degrees, **[more]**

Contact Gina Mahalek for review copies/author interviews [919] 962-0581

Fax [919] 966-3829 | E-mail: Gina\_Mahalek@unc.edu

## 6-6-6 Holy Smoke: The Big Book of North Carolina Barbecue

just the way it came out of the pit. Call it *sous vide*, if you want to—whatever you call it, it works like a charm.

### **Q: What's the history of serving alcohol at barbecue joints and restaurants? Should I care if I can't get a beer with my barbecue and Brunswick stew?**

**John:** Most barbecue places in North Carolina don't sell beer—not to mention wine or hard liquor. One reason is that they're more likely than places in the Deep South to be family restaurants rather than "joints." They're places the after-church crowd would feel comfortable, if they were open on Sunday (which most aren't—we've actually got the numbers on that). A lot of North Carolinians see beer as rather *louche*. There's also the fact—and it is a fact—that beer goes better with the sweet sauces you find in other states than with the vinegar-based sauces we have in North Carolina. Vinegar-based sauces call for drinks like Cheerwine, Pepsi, or sweet tea—there's a sort of sweet-and-sour thing going on. So I drink beer while I'm cooking, and tea when I'm eating.

**William:** You're more likely to find beer at recently established places, and generally in metropolitan areas or vacation spots in the mountains or at the beach. Heck, the Skylight Inn only served Pepsi—not even sweet tea—until the 1990s. B's in Greenville uses old whiskey bottles for its table sauce, but it's not clear where they come from. Keaton's, in Cleveland, does serve beer, but no more than two per customer. This *de facto* Prohibition is ironic considering that a lot of pit masters would tell you a major reason to cook barbecue the old-fashioned way is to have an excuse to drink. (The murals in Ed Mitchell's old restaurant in Wilson showed guys drinking out of a jug marked "XXX" next to where the pigs were cooking.)

### **Q: Would it be wrong to take a bottle of wine to a pig pickin'? If not, what kind of wine goes best with barbecue?**

**Dale:** We've got some recommendations in the book from folks who seem to know what they're talking about, but as traditionalists we're skeptical and stick with the house wine of the South—that is, sweet tea. We quote one guy who says if you're going to drink wine, for Pete's sake drink *cheap* wine. It's pretentious enough without drinking the expensive stuff.

**William:** I would think long and hard before taking wine to a pig pickin'. After drinking all day a tipsy pit master might mistake the bottle for something to put on the pig or christen the cooker with. If you do bring a bottle, you'll want something that can stand up to the vinegar in the sauce. I'm a big believer in drinking wines that come from the areas where the food originates, but Southern wines are generally more delicate than what a pig pickin' brings to the table. If you're hell-bent on drinking wine, a big strong unoaked Chardonnay or a Beaujolais might work. Now, as a 26-year-old talking about wine, I will proceed to lie down in the road and hope to be hit by a bus.

### **Q: Is barbecue a political dish? If so, how?**

**John:** It certainly *has* been political. Until the rise of television campaign ads, it would have been impossible to be elected to office in North Carolina without feeding barbecue to the voters.

[more]

Contact Gina Mahalek for review copies/author interviews [919] 962-0581

Fax [919] 966-3829 | E-mail: Gina\_Mahalek@unc.edu

## 7-7-7 Holy Smoke: The Big Book of North Carolina Barbecue

As one Raleigh newspaperman said, “No man has ever been elected governor of North Carolina without eating more barbecue than is good for him.” Rufus Edmisten claims he lost an election because he said he was tired of barbecue. The Mallard Creek Presbyterian Church has an annual barbecue that is to this day almost a required stop for state and local candidates.

**William:** Barbecue in North Carolina is primaries, debates, yard signs, bumper stickers, robo-calls, and victory parties all wrapped up into one and multiplied by ten. It's political because politicians host barbecues, praise barbecue, and attend barbecues to campaign. It's political because different parts of the state compete about whose barbecue is better and best represents the state. It's political because the hog industry is one of the biggest businesses in the state and restaurants' wood supplies dried up when the furniture industry moved off-shore. If North Carolina ever turns to a third-party, grand coalition to govern, it will probably be called the Barbecue Party.

**Q: How close is the taste of today's barbecue to that made with the fattier pork of yore?**

**Dale:** We weren't around in days of yore, so we can't tell you of our own knowledge, but old-timers say that pork was better in the old days. Of course they say that about almost everything. Tastes may have changed at least as much as the pork. Even those fatter pigs weren't fat enough for colonial palates—the barbecue George Washington ate was basted with butter or lard to make it even greasier.

**John:** “Pasture-raised” pork comes closer to the old-timey stuff than the shrink-wrapped, factory-farmed product you get in your grocery store, and we think it does taste marginally better, although maybe not enough to justify the price difference. After all, part of the charm of barbecue is taking a cheap cut of meat and turning it into something delicious. Some of the fun is gone if it costs as much as steak to begin with. But the price is coming down, and if you add in considerations of humane treatment for the pigs, maybe it's worth it.

**William:** The fact that barbecue is a bit drier than it once was may be one of the reasons sauces have become more popular—to the point that many people think they're what “make” barbecue.

**Q: Is there a polite way to complain about too much gristle in your barbecue? How much gristle would you consider to be too much?**

**John:** Any gristle is too much. Whoever's chopping or slicing the barbecue should get the gristle out and you should be able to chew every bite. Skin, though, is a different matter—and a matter of taste. Some whole-hog places down east make a point of chopping some crunchy skin into the mix. And some shoulder cooks in the Piedmont complain about that.

**William:** People like to say that the best thing about barbecue is that bad barbecue is still good, but gristly barbecue is not good. It's tough and unpleasant. Gristle often means that some tough strands of fat haven't been rendered. Good barbecue will have most of that slowly cooked out. On the other hand, fat is tasty; it's part of what separates barbecue from something more dainty like a tenderloin. Take all the fat out of barbecue and you'll have a pretty bad product.

[more]

Contact Gina Mahalek for review copies/author interviews [919] 962-0581

Fax [919] 966-3829 | E-mail: Gina\_Mahalek@unc.edu

## 8-8-8 Holy Smoke: The Big Book of North Carolina Barbecue

**Q: If I follow your directions for making my own barbecue, how likely is it that strangers “following the smoke” will show up and ask to be invited to stay? Do you have any house rules for such a situation?**

**William:** Your neighbors will come by to inquire, even the ones you think may not be too fond of you (I speak from personal experience). They’re bound to notice when the smoke comes wafting into their yards. You can probably get by with saying, “It isn’t ready yet—sorry!” because for much of the day this will be absolutely true. But eventually you may have to feed a few additional guests. By the way, one thing that burns me up is when people want to look at the pig. We all know what pigs look like—I could draw one for you. And if you’re looking, as they say, it ain’t cookin’. Every time you open the cooker the cooking time gets increased because it takes so much time to heat things back up.

**Q: Did you encounter anything particularly outlandish posing as or challenging traditional North Carolina barbecue?**

**John:** There’s a growing number of places that serve barbecue from other traditions, especially in the mountain and on the coast and in our bigger cities, where they’ve got out-of-state tourists or migrants from other parts of the country who want the kind of barbecue they’re used to. Don’t get us wrong: This stuff can be good eating, and we eat it from time to time ourselves. But it’s not *North Carolina barbecue*. We have an extended rant on this subject in the book.

**William:** There are exceptions, but by and large brisket and ribs are best left to Texans and other interlopers. And one place we went serves pork collars, a lean cut of meat that doesn’t lend itself well to the barbecue process. I’ve had barbecued deer—it was good, but not something I’d cook every day. Probably the best “outlandish” dish we’ve run into is the “barbecue chicken” at Keaton’s. One could hold a philosophical summit on whether the chicken is “barbefried” or “frybecued”: it’s fried, then dipped into boiling barbecue sauce for just a second. It’s unique, and divine.

**Dale:** One interesting development is that we’re starting to see *really* out-of-state barbecue, cooked all over North Carolina by recent immigrants. There’s Korean *kalbi*—marinated ribs—in Durham. There’s *Far* Eastern-style—that is, Chinese—in Charlotte. (Talk about whole-hog, how about heads and stomachs, too?) And of course Mexican *barbacòda* all over the place.

**William:** I’ve seen Thai Rooster sauce (Sriracha) served with barbecue as a hot sauce, and now I keep it at the house for that. Every culture has charcoal, grills, tough cuts of meat, and spices, and there’s plenty of room at the table in North Carolina for these flavors to go to work.

**Q: What’s the future of North Carolina barbecue?**

**William:** Good old-fashioned barbecue, pit-cooked with oak and hickory, is getting harder to find, but we hope it won’t disappear. It shouldn’t. Too many people are fond of it, and these old barbecue places help make so many communities in North Carolina what they are.

[more]

## **9-9-9 Holy Smoke: The Big Book of North Carolina Barbecue**

**John:** Cooking barbecue right is a hard way to make a living, and unless you have discerning customers who appreciate what you're doing it's awfully tempting to take the easy (and less expensive) short cuts—as all too many places have done.

**Dale:** That's one reason we wrote this book.

###

This interview may be reprinted in its entirety with the following credit: A conversation John Shelton Reed, Dale Volberg Reed, and William McKinney, authors of **HOLY SMOKE: THE BIG BOOK OF NORTH CAROLINA BARBECUE** (University of North Carolina Press, Fall 2008). The text of this interview is available at [www.ibiblio.org/uncp/media/reed](http://www.ibiblio.org/uncp/media/reed).

### **PUBLISHING DETAILS**

ISBN 978-0-8078-3243-1, \$30.00 hardcover; Publication date: November 1, 2008

Approx. 416 pp., 150 illus., 2-color throughout, suggested readings, index

<http://uncpress.unc.edu/books/T-8418.html>

The University of North Carolina Press, [www.uncpress.unc.edu](http://www.uncpress.unc.edu)

116 South Boundary Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27514-3808

919-966-3561 (office) 1-800-848-6224 (orders) 919-966-3829 (fax)

### **CONTACTS**

Publicity: Gina Mahalek, 919-962-0581; [gina\\_mahalek@unc.edu](mailto:gina_mahalek@unc.edu)

Sales: Michael Donatelli, 919-962-0475; [michael\\_donatelli@unc.edu](mailto:michael_donatelli@unc.edu)

Rights: Vicky Wells, 919-962-0369; [vicky\\_wells@unc.edu](mailto:vicky_wells@unc.edu)