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Cultural Commentary: Eating High off the Hog

by Garland Kimmer



In the 1860s, Matthew Arnold defined culture as “sweetness and light.” At the ripe old age of thirty-four, I’ve decided that it’s time to rethink that definition just a little bit. Real culture consists of the ready availability of three items that come just behind food, clothing, and shelter on my list for necessities of survival: barbecue, sweet tea, and Atlantic Coast Conference basketball. It all seemed so simple to be able to define culture in this way until about a year ago.

I’m new here. Okay, maybe not quite new anymore, but I’ve only been living here for the last two years. I came to Bridgewater State after living my whole life in North Carolina and really wasn’t sure what to expect. I knew that the property values would be higher, the temperatures lower, and the Red Sox would be mathematically eliminated from the pennant race by the time I started teaching my summer session class. Still, that’s not an awful lot to go on. It didn’t tell me anything about the food, drink, and the hoops that I’d be able to enjoy in this new part of the world.

It’s the same old story. I came up here, met my students, enjoyed my classes, tried to convince everyone around me that “y’all” was a much needed addition to the English language, and ate a lot of seafood. After a couple of months of this pattern, I started to notice a longing. No, make that a craving, for something that I just couldn’t seem to find anywhere. I needed my native cuisine and needed it badly. The only problem was that I didn’t live in North Carolina anymore, so finding native North Carolina cuisine was going to be an adventure unless I could click my heels together and say “there’s no place like home, there’s no place like home.” Needless to say, that didn’t work.

Let me digress for a second. As far as I can tell, North Carolina has made only one great contribution to world cuisine: BARBECUE. It’s heavenly. In fact, if it came in liquid form, it’d be the nectar of the gods. It also has to be served with bottomless glasses of sweetened iced tea. I make this other form of nectar at home, so my longing for tea just couldn’t compare to what I was experiencing for barbecue. They say that breaking the addiction to cigarettes is bad, but I can’t see any way the withdrawal pains from nicotine come near the sensations that I was experiencing last Fall.

If you’ve never eaten barbecue, then you’re missing out on a treat. The problem is that barbecue is one of those words that means something different in every part of the country. The Oxford English Dictionary, that wise repository of all that is good and useful in the English language, tells us that it’s both a noun and a verb, as in “to barbecue.” Real barbecue is not a verb. As a noun, it comes into the English language from a Haitian word describing a “framework of sticks set upon posts.” Somewhere along the line, this framework moved away from its use for sleeping and toward supporting meat that was to be cooked. In much of America, including New England, you can have “a barbecue” in the back yard or at the pool. Down south, barbecue does not have an “a” in front of it. It’s just “barbecue.”

Trying to describe barbecue is nigh upon impossible because there are all kinds of varieties that spread from North Carolina all the way to Texas, an area that one scholar in the field has labeled “the barbecue belt.” In Texas, barbecue means something completely different



The real thing
in West Newton

than it does in most of the South. Texans use beef brisket and beef ribs, with side dishes of beans and Texas toast, to go with the thick, spicy, tomato-based sauces. Memphis features pork (especially ribs) with a rich rub cooked over hickory and served with a thick, tangy tomato sauce. Kansas City style barbecue combines these traits, at least according to their promotional materials. These same materials, however, admit one important fact: that barbecue was born in the Carolinas. The brochure does not say that North Carolina has the best barbecue, but it's almost certainly written between the lines.

North Carolina does have the best barbecue. As in most of the civilized world, North Carolina barbecue refers only to pork. The best places only serve it off the shoulder, with a large plate of hushpuppies (small pieces of a cornmeal dough deep fried to golden perfection) and a glass of sweet tea. Even in North Carolina, though, we argue about the best kind of barbecue. There are two main versions of North Carolina barbecue: eastern and western. The line that traditionally divides the two styles is drawn right through the state capital in Raleigh. The eastern style is characterized by meat that is finely chopped or sliced and the sauce is peppery vinegar. Some of the best places in the eastern part of the state are Bullock's Barbecue in Durham and Wilber's Barbecue in Goldsboro, which also won the *Southern Living* magazine award for the best barbecue in the South. One other tidbit: they'll ship their sauce if you happen to live in Massachusetts.

Regardless of what *Southern Living* has to say, western North Carolina barbecue is the real deal. The pork shoulder is doused in a sauce rich with vinegar and tomatoes. The one spot that constitutes a pilgrimage for barbecue fans is Lexington, a scant 25 miles from where I grew up. Lexington is also known as "the barbecue capital of the world." In Lexington, October was officially declared "Barbecue Month" and the cycling event, the Parade of Pigs (also called the Tour de Pig). It's not the celebrations that make Lexington Barbecue special, however. It's the rest of the year when you can go into any of the dozens of barbecue joints and come away with a meal fit for a king. The best barbecue in world can be found at the aptly named Lexington Barbecue. When I was home over the summer, I even ran into one of my graduate school advisors who'd driven three hours just for dinner.

Back to my craving. You can already tell that I think too much about barbecue and have undoubtedly guessed that it was becoming such a frequent visitor in my dreams that I couldn't even watch Porky Pig on the Cartoon Network. I needed help and needed it bad. Fortunately, I chose to talk to someone about my addiction. Even more fortunately, I told my tale of woe to one of my colleagues, Mike Boyd of the English Department, who grew up in Texas. He sympathized and, rather than starting me on the road to wellness, suggested that he knew a place that just might solve my problem. Somehow in the midst of our discussions, I found out that Bill Smith, also of the English Department, was another displaced North Carolinian, and this modern-day triumvirate planned a trip for barbecue. No, it wasn't a road trip worthy of Bob Hope and Bing Crosby, but we did go to West Newton, MA for barbecue. One of the owners had apparently encountered the phenomenon that is barbecue when he was in the military and brought it back with him to West Newton. That afternoon, I had North Carolina pulled pork and didn't even quibble that we "pick" the pig rather than "pull" it.

—Garland Kimmer is Assistant Professor of English