

BBQ&A: Jim Early, NC Barbecue Society Founder

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Jim Early is a good old fashioned barbecue renaissance man. A native of Henderson, NC, Early graduated from Wake Forest University law school and practiced as an attorney for many years. [His bio](#) notes that, "In addition to being an avid and accomplished hunter, fisherman, and gourmet cook, he also rides and brokers Tennessee walking horses, breeds and trains English Setters and Pointers, flies with his friends in hot air balloons and WWII war birds, restores British cars and classic Chris Craft mahogany speed boats, paints, writes, plays in bands and loves to dance."



While the above hobbies and accomplishments are interesting in their own right, most relevant to this website is the fact that Early founded the [North Carolina Barbecue Society \(NCBS\)](#). In 2007, he left his law practice to focus solely on NCBS, which has a mission "to preserve North Carolina's barbecue history and culture and to secure North Carolina's rightful place as the Barbecue Capital of the World."

In addition to founding NCBS, Early authored [The Best Tar Heel Barbecue: Manteo to Murphy](#), which remains the most comprehensive guidebook of NC barbecue joints (and retains a prime spot in my car's glove box). He has also authored a cookbook, leads business retreats, and makes presentations on work-life balance and stress reduction. Recently we added to Early's stress by asking him a book's worth of questions, which he was kind enough to answer.

BBQ Jew: In researching [The Best Tar Heel Barbecue: Manteo to Murphy](#), you visited all 100 counties in North Carolina and ate at 228 restaurants. How long did this field research take and what did you learn from the experience?

Jim Early: How I went about doing the field research for [The Best Tar Heel Barbecue: Manteo to Murphy](#) is described on pages 17-20 of the book. I wanted the research to be current and I pushed myself as hard as I possibly could to practice law 14-15 hours a day Monday through Thursday and drive to the area I was going to work and work 18 hour days Friday and Saturday in the field. Sunday morning I ate my first meal since Thursday and drove home to do 6-7 hours dictation and crash. This was my life for 6 months plus in 2001. Then I wrote the book and went through all the publishing hoops, distribution hoops, etc. The whole process was about 4,000 hours, 22,000+ miles, 2,000+ people, 100 counties and 228 BBQ places.

To my knowledge no one else has done a BBQ guide book that is this complete, this well researched and invested the time that I invested to complete the project. I learned that that there was a reason no one else had done such a project. The price is higher than most people are willing to pay. I have written several cook books and numerous magazine articles since I wrote [The Best Tar Heel Barbecue](#), but they

have been a walk in the park compared to the efforts I put into that book.

Some of the things I learned from the field research are that there are, to my knowledge, less than 30 old fashioned family owned BBQ places in NC that cook over pits fueled with live wood coals or charcoal and provide a sit-down dining experience for the public. There are, to my knowledge, less than six Black owned and operated BBQ pits in the state. There are, to my knowledge, less than three female owned and operated BBQ pits in the state. I could go on and on about change, but that would be another book and I do not want to tell you how to make a watch, when you only asked the time of day.

BBQ Jew: Speaking of NC's changing barbecue scene, what inspired you to start the North Carolina Barbecue Society (NCBS) and when was it founded? What was your original vision for the organization and how has that vision evolved over time?

JE: I founded NCBS after I completed the field research for The Best Tar Heel Barbecue and discovered that there were so few BBQ places cooking the old open pit method. I decided we need to do something to preserve this dying art and not let it become something one could only see at the State Fair in some roped off area called Old Timey Days along with a mock pack house, mule drawn tobacco slide, and a man making molasses. Also in my 25+ years of travel across the country as a public speaker, hunting and fishing guide/outfitter, when I told people I meet I was from NC they often responded "Oh you're the basketball or BBQ people." If it was BBQ, it was generally followed by "you people fight about your BBQ don't you?"

I thought NC is "The Cradle of Cue." Barbecue as we know it in North America started on our shores. It did not start in Memphis, Kansas City or Texas. NC needs to claim its rightful title as "The Cradle of Cue" (NCBS has this as a registered trade mark) and the Barbecue Capitol of the World (we claim this one too). We need to embrace the wonderful BBQ diversity we have in our state. We need to perform a wedding not perpetuate a war. If we are going to fight over BBQ lets fight with Memphis, Kansas City or Texas or any other self-proclaimed BBQ Mecca. We can have fun in the press with that one. We do not have to continue to shoot ourselves in the foot. Also agro-tourism is a big business. We needed to tap into that market. That is why I designed the NCBS Historic Barbecue Trail for NCBS. The Trail showcases the old timey pits and it promotes agro tourism. The Trail has received a tremendous amount of ink from the food/travel writers both in country and out of country.

The Society (NCBS) was started in 2006. The [website](#) was completed February 1, 2007. It is still (and will always be) a work in progress. Over the last three years I had visions for NCBS that I took to [the Board](#) and thankfully the Board blessed the visions. I wanted to put on BBQ events that would bring people from all over the country and out of country to NC and have them experience the amazing topographical diversity we have in our state. We have magnificent mountains, the rolling hills of the piedmont and a breathtaking seashore. We have diversity in our famous BBQ as well. We not only have the well known whole hog vinegar based eastern variety and shoulders slathered with a vinegar based tomato enhanced Lexington style dip, but we also have a smattering of Florida style cue in the mountains and a few pockets of SC mustard sauce BBQ that slipped over the border. NC has so much to offer and I want the world to know our state and our BBQ.

I want NCBS to be an ambassador and host to all who would come and experience the wonderful diversity of our BBQ and The Old North State. I want NCBS to teach the heritage and culture of old time BBQ cooking. I want our NCBS BBQ Boot Campers to experience the sights, sounds, smell, feel and comradery of cooking outside around a camp fire and tending to the low slow cooking of a pig or pig parts. I want them to hear the stories from a Pit Master that has cooked over 12,000 whole hogs or one that has cooked over 90 shoulders a week 51 weeks a year for 25+ years or one that has won over

100 state and national BBQ cooking contests. These Pit Masters and others like them, many of whom are already on the NCBS Wall of Fame are the backbone of our BBQ heritage and fame. If we do not preserve what they have to offer, their cooking skills, their stories etc., it will be lost.

I want NCBS events to be destination events and become one of the most desired experiences in BBQ/agro travel. This is happening for us. Our NCBS BBQ Boot Camps are attended by people from all over the country. We have had campers at our events from California, Kansas, Mississippi, Florida, Indiana, Georgia, New York and New Jersey to name a few states. And of course we have campers from NC—literally from Manteo to Murphy.

BBQ Jew: Especially given your aspirations to increase NC BBQ's national reputation, how does NCBS differ from the 10,000 member, nationally recognized [Kansas City Barbecue Society \(KCBS\)](#)? Is there anything KCBS does particularly well that you'd like to emulate and is there anything they do that you'd like to avoid?

JE: I am a member of the Kansas City Barbeque Society and have been one of their certified BBQ Judges for a number of years. I have judged many of the KCBS sanctioned large events. KCBS is presently celebrating its 25th year and is a fine organization. KCBS emphasis is on competition BBQ cooking. It sanctions events produced by others and for a fee it provides a group that will oversee the judging process and tabulate the results. The KCBS newspaper The Bull Sheet is devoted primarily to reporting the results of KCBS sanctioned events. KCBS also sanctions some cooking classes and judging classes.

NCBS' emphasis is set forth above. NCBS teaches its Boot Campers to be really good BBQ cooks, be it backyard, competition and/or public dining. We teach novice, competition cooks, chefs, and pit masters how to take it to the next level and to Cook Without Fear. Our NCBS Cooking Class faculties are composed of the Best of the Best. Our NCBS Certified BBQ Judges will be, in my opinion, the best trained and most knowledgeable BBQ judges on the planet.

In response to the last part of your previous question, from what I have observed KCBS has good software to tabulate judging scores and should NCBS find itself in the BBQ sanctioning business I would hope we would have similar software. NCBS Certified Judging Classes are not produced in the same manner as the KCBS sanctioned Certified Judging Classes. I have not attended a KCBS sanctioned cooking class, but have only heard reports about the classes. The NCBS Cooking Classes appear to be decidedly different from the KCBS sanctioned cooking classes.

BBQ Jew: You have written that the [slow food movement](#), with its emphasis on preserving traditional food and techniques, is an inspiration for NCBS. Despite being served as fast food in the speed-to-your-table sense, barbecue done right is perhaps America's ultimate slow food. Why does the slow food movement strike a chord with you?

JE: Perhaps the slow food movement strikes a chord with me because that is the way I like to cook. A pig cooked low and slow at 225 degrees for 14 hours, a Brunswick stew cooked in a big black iron pot and lovingly stirred for 10-12 hours, recipes that require one to spend most of a day in the kitchen with someone they care about and a glass of fine wine and good music appeal to all of my senses. I like to prepare a great meal/feast surround it with friends and DINE. There is considerable difference in eating and dining.

I like the old big band music having played in big bands for 5 years. I like old finely made shotguns. I like old Chris Craft wooden speed boats and restored them for years. I like old British sport cars and restored them for years as well. I like to make food offerings from scratch when I have time. I like to

paint with oils when I have time. I like the old breeds of bird dogs. I like Texas long horn cattle. I like many of the old European breeds of stock and fowl even though they do not produce or take too long to produce the amount of beef, pork and chicken etc. to be competitive in today's market place. I like cheese, wine, bread and fine chocolates made the old fashioned, hand crafted way by artisans with patience and passion.

So it is only natural for me to be attracted to the slow food movement. I want to preserve all that is good about NC's rich agro history, heritage and culture and share it with the world. BBQ is old and slow and plays a big part in our NC history and this is the part that will receive NCBS's main focus.

BBQ Jew: In the last couple years, NCBS has moved more aggressively into general outreach and education. You now regularly offer "BBQ Boot Camps" where campers learn to cook barbecue, as well as classes to train barbecue judges. Why this new emphasis?

JE: The first year of our existence we were getting our legs and learning what our members wanted. The members wanted to learn to be better cooks and a number of members wanted to be BBQ judges. I told the Board I would like to do this, but I did not want NCBS to be just another entity providing cooking classes and BBQ judging classes. I sat down with the people whose opinions I respect and we went to the drawing board and designed the type of classes we thought we would want to attend. Our classes have been very successful. I as well as our Board always want to be a student. This emphasis on education is in keeping with our programs that earned NCBS the IRS designation of a 501(c)(3) non-profit public charity. We are about preserving, teaching, building, etc.

BBQ Jew: One of the interesting things you note on the NCBS website is the lack of woman- and minority-owned barbecue joints. You write that, "Almost all of the pit masters that I met [while researching NC barbecue for my book] were minorities but the businesses were not owned by minorities and only a few of the businesses were owned and operated by women." Was this always the case or have woman- and minority-ownership rates dropped over the years? Why does the lack of woman- and minority-owned BBQ joints matter and what is NCBS doing to try and change things?

JE: When I was a small boy in eastern NC there were a number of small mom and pop BBQ places. The daddy ran the pits and the momma ran the kitchen with the help of the children after school and on weekends. To my memory a goodly number of these mom pop places were Black owned and operated. This kinder, gentler time is described in The Best Tar Heel Barbecue pages 21-24. It was a real eye opening for me when I did the field research for my book and discover the facts set forth above. I think Blacks have played a substantial part in our NC BBQ history and I want their role recognized and remembered.

I also remember that when some of the pit masters died the widows inherited and carried on the family BBQ business and many did it quite well. I know BBQ is primarily a man's game, but there are many ladies that have paid their dues and carried a man's load in the BBQ world to help put food on the table. And some families will tell you that if it were not for the "mama" of their mom and pop joint it would have folded because "pop" could cook a pig, but "mama's" hand in the kitchen and on the cash drawer kept the place afloat.

Will the lack of Black owned and operated or female owned and operated BBQ places in the state change the way BBQ is perceived in NC? No, I do not think it will. This moment in time has passed just like the old fashioned wood fired open pit cooked BBQ era passed in the '60s and early '70s. Most people are not even aware it passed. NCBS cannot change BBQ—the way it is being cooked, the lack of Black and female owned and operated pits etc.—to the 1940s to '50s. NCBS can remember the best

about those times, preserve our rich BBQ history and culture and honor the NC BBQ icons and those good folks who made NC THE BBQ CAPITOL OF THE WORLD.



BBQ Jew: One of the most helpful things NCBS has done for barbetourists like myself is to create the NCBS Historic Barbecue Trail, which includes 24 well-established barbecue joints across the state that cook the traditional way in pits over wood or charcoal. Out of the hundreds—thousands?—of barbecue joints across North Carolina, how many would you estimate cook with the traditional technique of using wood-fired pits? Do you think this number compares favorably or poorly to other barbecue meccas, like Texas and Memphis?

JE: It is my opinion, after doing my field research for my book, that there are less than 30 old fashioned family owned pits cooking BBQ with live coals, either charcoal or wood, and serving the public. I am guessing from what I learned that there are over 3,000 places in NC that serve BBQ in some form-on a buffet, on a sandwich, etc. Many smaller places buy the cue frozen from a BBQ wholesaler and heat it as needed for their business. I believe, and would state upon information and belief, that about 99% or more of the BBQ served the public is cooked with electricity or gas.

I have eaten BBQ in Texas, Memphis and Kansas City as well as most all of the other lower 48 states and Alaska [Editor's note: It sounds like Mr. Early is in dire need of a trip to Hawaii for a luau to round out his travels]. I have not done the extensive BBQ research in another state that I have in NC. However, in my travels about the country it would appear that NC probably has about the same ratio of old fashioned wood fired BBQ pits as other self-proclaimed BBQ meccas and for the same reasons.

BBQ Jew: Given that the Barbecue Trail excludes some joints that put in the time and sweat to cook the traditional way, does NCBS have plans to promote the rest of these joints that are cooking barbecue the real way?

JE: The NCBS Historic Barbecue Trail is not carved in stone. If a pit that is on the Trail should decide to cook in a manner that does not comport with the requirements to be on the Trail (requirements are set forth on the home page of the BBQ Trail link) that pit will be removed from the Trail. If a pit on the Trail fails to comply with any of the other requirements to be on the Trail the pit will be removed. If NCBS should learn of a pit that appears to qualify for the Trail that pit will be checked out and if the pit meets all the requirements it will be placed on the Trail. Pits have been removed and pits added since the Trail was first designed. By design I limited the number of pits per town/city to two so as to have a trail and not a bar bell shape. In those instances where a city or town had more than two pits that might qualify for the Trail, I did a limited public survey to pick the two. NCBS will promote all that is good about NC BBQ. One needs to understand that just cooking cue with a wood fired pit is not a panacea. I

have eaten some average and below average BBQ cooked “the old fashioned way.” And I have eaten some good pork cooked with electricity and with gas.

BBQ Jew: If promoting traditional joints is the yin for ensuring the survival of wood cooking, it would seem that advocating against joints that take gas or electric shortcuts is the yang. What advice do you have for customers of BBQ joints that are switching, or have already switched, away from traditional cooking methods? Should they voice their dissatisfaction?

JE: As previously stated, in my opinion about 99% plus of NC’s BBQ places cook with gas or electricity. NCBS will promote all that is good about NC BBQ. If the food is good, then it is good. It does not seem to matter to the general public whether the cue was cooked on wood fired pits, with gas, with electricity or on a hot rock if the cooker did a commendable job and produced a tasty product. And what is good has a lot to do with where the customer grew up and his or her exposure to local cue. On a couple of occasions I have had a person ask me if I had eaten at a place in their hometown. I had. They then went on to tell me they ate at this place 4/5 times a week and it was the best BBQ they had ever tasted. I did not share that I would not eat at their favorite place if I worked in the kitchen and it was free. I also would not say a disparaging word about the place’s cue. I simply would subscribe to the admonishment that Thumper rabbit’s mama gave him, “If you cannot say something nice don’t say anything at all.” I do not think a customer should tell a man/woman how to run their business. If they do not like the cue, move to another pit. They do not have to pay the price of cooking “the old fashioned way.”

Operating an “old fashioned BBQ pit” is a lot of long hours and hot, hard work and it costs more to cook that way. When the BBQ Icon whose name is on the door is not able to cook the cue, or has made enough money to get someone else to cook for him then he incurs the cost of a Pit Master. He must buy wood (hickory is expensive and hard to get). Charcoal is also costly. The owner must pay higher fire insurance premiums because he has live flame in his building. The owner must install a very costly ventilation system. The owner must constantly dance with the environmental folks because his pit makes smoke. The business is generally “grandfathered” and cannot grow or move. If the business is closed for a period (owner dies or is sick) the family is afraid they will lose their grandfather status and the business will be closed. The owner, if all goes well, still has 15/16 hour days and lots of clean-up due to soot, ash, etc. The business is prone to chimney fires and other hazards not found with gas or electrical cooking. And yet, the “old fashioned pit” owner has to sell his BBQ sandwich at a competitive price to meet his competition down the street that cooks with gas or electricity and has none of costs, problems or time involved with cooking “the old fashioned” way. Small wonder there are so few “old fashioned pits” left.

BBQ Jew: Very good points. While we’re on the topic of traditional cooking... Although wood-fired pits are disappearing everywhere, they seem to be a bit more common in the Piedmont than down east. I’ve heard several explanations for this, none of them all that convincing. What’s your take?

JE: Based upon my best information Davidson County NC had/has more BBQ pits per capita than any other place on the planet. The count changes, but I was advised Davidson County had about 39/40 BBQ places and a population of about 20,000. There are about 20 BBQ places in or very near downtown Lexington. I was further advised that the Davidson County BBQ places collectively were one of, if not the, largest county employer after some of the larger industries closed or moved. Whether this info is entirely accurate or not, I believe it to be pretty close to the truth. Davidson County has the largest concentration of wood/charcoal-fired pits of which I am aware. It probably has more wood/charcoal fired pits than all the “old fashioned BBQ pits” east of Raleigh put together. I have heard several explanations for this as well. I do not buy all of any of the explanations I have heard.

My take is that the Davidson County concentration of wood/charcoal fired pits is market driven. If I were a young man, born in Davidson County, and I wanted to stay there, and my daddy cooked BBQ and I had worked at a BBQ joint as a teenager I probably would go into the BBQ business. I would do this especially if I did not have a skill set that would land me a really, really great job with fewer hours and much better pay. And knowing how small my customer base would be, given the number of BBQ joints and the population of the county, I would try to cook the best cue I knew how to make, and do it in the most competitive way I could regardless of the hard work and hours involved. We are talking about making a living, eating regularly, paying bills and living indoors. And I would have Lexington Barbecue Speedy's, The Barbecue Center, Speedy Lohr's and a host of other well known BBQ pits cooking in my backyard. I would cook with wood-fired pits, work my butt off and pray a lot.



If I were a young man and lived in a little town in eastern NC and wanted to stay there and my daddy had taught me how to cook BBQ and I had worked in a BBQ/hamburger/hotdog joint as a teenager I would probably go into the BBQ business if there was not already one in town. I would do this for the same reasons as I would if I were a young man from Davidson County. However, I would cook with gas or electricity like most of the BBQ places in the east. Gas and electricity produce a good pork product. I would not have to compete with 39 other BBQ places (many cooking with wood-fired pits) in my backyard. I would, in all probability, only have to compete with a McDonald's and a Taco Bell. My closest BBQ competition would probably be 50/60 miles away and his cue in all likelihood would not be any better than mine, unless he was one of the half dozen eastern NC BBQ icons on the NCBS Historic Barbecue Trail. The price of gas would keep most of my customers at home. I would improve my cash flow and my quality of life by my cooking choice. I would have more time to hunt and fish.

BBQ Jew: A couple years back I saw your name attached to an effort to bring a major BBQ festival to Raleigh that would include the best of Eastern- and Lexington-style barbecue. As I recall, the idea was to have the Eastern-style joints set up on the east side of Fayetteville Street (Raleigh's main downtown drag) and the Lexington-style joints on the west side. It sounded like a great idea, what in hog heaven happened?

JE: I invested over 5 months of my time to put this event together and had my part ready to go. As tempting as it is to tell the story, it would serve no useful purpose, and I choose not to revisit it. That being said, I will not forget it.

BBQ Jew: Fair enough, moving on... If you could eat barbecue just one last time, would you prefer it be Eastern- or Lexington-style? If you're half as smart as you seem, I'm guessing you'll dodge this question too. However, you've lived in the heart of Lexington-style country for a long time so you can't claim geographic neutrality like I do.

JE: I have been asked this question many times, in many forms. Knowing that I would be asked this question when I wrote the book, I have already made my declaration on page 22. And I quote: "North Carolina is the source of the best barbecue in the world. I was born in Eastern North Carolina. Having lived west of the line all of my adult life, I have acquired a taste for the Lexington-style barbecue and dip and find it absolutely delicious. But my roots, my heart and my barbecue preference are (and always will be) slightly EAST of the old Capitol building."

BBQ Jew: I'm already a NCBS member, but convince the doubters: Why should someone spend his or her hard-earned money to become a member? And what is the oath that members have to take?

JE: If one subscribes to the NCBS Mission Statement set forth on our website and on the back page of every monthly issue of NCBS Pig Tales then NCBS may be a fit. If one has PRIDE IN NORTH CAROLINA and all it has to offer and a PASSION FOR GREAT BBQ then NCBS may be a fit. If one wants to preserve all that is good about NC BBQ and the rich agro culture from which it has its roots then NCBS may be a fit. If one wants to help teach people (young and older) how to COOK WITH NO FEAR then NCBS may be a fit. If one wishes to be one of the Best of the Best BBQ Judges then NCBS may be a fit. If one wishes to vastly improve their quality of life then NCBS may be a fit. NCBS is not what I call a "Chittlin Strut Club"—i.e., get together annually or semi-annually eat, drink, tell tall tales and go home. Nothing wrong with that, it is just not who we are.

The base \$35 annual membership fee helps support our mission. This fee is only slightly more than a movie for two with drinks and a large popcorn. Members receive monthly editions of NCBS Pig Tales and NCBS Piglet bulletins. Members are given first chance at participating in all NCBS events before the event is opened to the non-member public. Our events are capped and sell out quickly and rarely do non-members have an opportunity to participate.

THE OATH: "I promise to give some of my time, energies and funds to further the goals of NCBS (a.k.a. 'THE FUN TRIBE') to wit: cook and/or 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' wherever my journey takes me."

North Carolina BBQ and NCBS has always been and I hope always will be about GOOD FOOD, GOOD FRIENDS AND GOOD TIMES. JOIN "THE FUN TRIBE" AND HELP NCBS KEEP THE FIRES BURNING!

BBQ Jew: Well said! Any final words of wisdom to share with our readers?

JE: There is a verse of scripture that has always been in the forefront of my life. It reads if you are luke warm I will spew thee out of my mouth. I never want to be luke warm about anything. I want to be an "A" if I succeed at my goals and an "F" if I should fall while striving mightily. I never want to be a "C" if I could have done better.

Since early childhood I have had a big place in my heart for cowboys and horses. I have always thought of myself as a cowboy by my definition of what a cowboy truly is – ferociously independent, free spirited, fun loving and an itch to see what is on the other side of the mountain. So a number of my heroes have been cowboys. My all time favorite cowboy hero is Teddy Roosevelt. The Teddy Roosevelt

quote to which I have patterned my life is as follows:

“It is not the critic who counts –
Not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled,
Or where the doer of deeds could have done them better.
The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena
Whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood.
Who strives valiantly, who errs, and comes short again and again,
Who knows the great enthusiasm, the great devotions,
and spends himself in a worthy cause –
Who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement,
And who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly.
So that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls,
Who know neither victory nor defeat.”

I hope this quote appeals to some of your readers as well. It has been a Polar Star for me over the years.