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SMOKE GETS IN YOUR EYES

In search of Black barbecue history

BY LATRIA GRAHAM

WALK INTO JUST ABOUT ANY HOME DECOR store in the country and next to the LIVE, LAUGH, LOVE signs and the FAITH, FAMILY, FOOTBALL throw pillows, there are tchotchkes covered with quips like, WHERE THERE'S SMOKE, THERE'S BARBECUE, or REAL MEN DON'T USE RECIPES.

And then there's my favorite: RED, WHITE, AND BBQ. The creator is saying that barbecue has become a foodstuff so important to our national culture it is worth swapping out one of the colors of our flag. Slogans like these—the product of bombastic American marketing—leave out the tougher, chewier bits of history that we must acknowledge in order to understand Southern barbecue.

I've listened to barbecue purveyors reference early colonial drawings of Indigenous people smoking fish on a rack of sticks and then jump straight to present-day barbecue, skipping over centuries of culinary evolution. I've heard pitmasters say, "I don't know how this style of barbecue got here." There are three ways such aberrations happen: erasure, omission, or exclusion. Completely removing characters from the story, cherry picking facts, or outright barring folks from telling their story.

I call this "smokelore"—pasting together a version of facts that projects what we wish were true instead of what is. Families like mine get caught in the gulf between.

My family had a farm in Newberry County, South Carolina, and a produce stand up the highway in Spartanburg. I grew up in this agricultural tradition—100-plus acres of family parcels all lumped together, a legacy going back five generations.

We were farm-to-table folks before there was a name for it. That means whatever we didn't sell at our family produce stand went into five-gallon slop buckets for our hogs. Twice a week I loaded the buckets into the back of my dad's gold Ford pickup truck and drove the stinky stuff down to the barn.

Our extended family had our squabbles, but taking care of hogs was one thing everybody could agree on. It always paid off during killing time. Back then, the men in my family would process the hogs. When the work was done, every household on the Graham family land received the bounty of that labor. There were often two fires going: one for washpot cracklins and another for whole-hog barbecue. The pit for the latter still stands at the back of Graham property, not far from the shotgun house where my dad was born.

My father, Dennis Graham Jr., brought that

Illustrations by Lindsey Bailey

same ethic of community care to his work selling produce in Spartanburg. He learned from his regular customers that major swaths of the city struggled with food apartheid. From certain neighborhoods, it was two to three miles to the nearest grocery store. Four assisted living facilities were located in these same neighborhoods. The residents, many of them walker and wheelchair users without cars, had to figure out how they were going to eat. They couldn't walk for miles with a load of groceries, and Spartanburg had limited bus routes.

For years, my father did what he could to fill the need. Early on Wednesday mornings, he'd pack the bed of his truck with tomato boxes of our best produce. He would spend his day—often accompanied by me or my little brother, Nicholas—driving across Spartanburg, selling produce to customers who couldn't reach our stand. We even got an early-model, handheld EBT card reader so those on benefits could shop with us.

Each stop along my dad's route might take an hour. As a teenager, I thought the shoppers were indecisive. I didn't understand until later that, for some folks, this was the first time in years they'd had the power of choice in selecting their vegetables.

A couple of years ago, I saw a Facebook post from my hometown farmers' market, the same one that wouldn't allow my dad to be a vendor. The post heralded the opening of a mobile market: a truck and trailer that would serve neighborhoods where people had trouble getting fresh food.

Almost twenty years after my father started his route, and less than ten years after his death, I felt as though that announcement erased his years of effort. There was no acknowledgment that mobile markets were staples in Black and poor communities for generations, often run by members of those communities. Nor did the Facebook post mention the disparities that necessitated mobile vendors to begin with, particularly redlining and discrimination aimed at Black people and the poor and disabled.

My father was a part of a generations-old culture of coming to the customer. The practice goes back hundreds of years and thousand miles, from Ghananian women carrying baskets of food on their heads; to Black women in Charleston selling goods door to door; to men like the late New Orleans vegetable vendor Arthur James Robinson, known as Mr. Okra. Their methods changed with inventions like the automobile and innovations like the mobile EBT machine, but their labor made it easier for those geographically or socially on the fringes to get what they needed. The relative invisibility of their labor—my father's work included—has much in common with the smokelore that surrounds barbecue history.

Barbecue in what is now the Southeastern United States came into its own before the time of state lines. Before there were even colonies. While it's true that several authors over the past few years have reclaimed Black and Indigenous contributions to barbecue history, I wanted to understand how the erasure happened to begin with, and why it persisted for so long.

Barbacoas, a framework of sticks that supported meat as it smoked over a fire, were adopted by Spanish settlers in the Caribbean after they saw Indigenous people practicing what by then was a centuries-old method. Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto was the first to introduce domestic swine to the mainland of North America around 1539. In 1585, when Englishman Sir Walter Raleigh sent an expedition force to what is now the Carolinas, John White sketched some of the earliest barbecue methods: Two fish, wreathed in smoke from the fire below, lie on top of a rack of sticks held high by Y-shaped branches. Another pair, removed from direct heat, are being cooked on upright stakes. In a 1590 engraving by Theodor De Bry, Indigenous men tend fish cooked over a flame in a similar way.

I wanted to learn more about how subsequent documentation was lost to factual cherry picking over the centuries. So, in the fall of 2020, I took a trip to Charleston and the South Carolina Lowcountry to understand the roots of this country's culinary traditions, including the sort of whole-hog barbecuing our family used to do.

Gadsden's Wharf sits on the banks of the Cooper River in downtown Charleston. Over three hundred years ago, in Lowcountry ports like this one, bodies bound by chains emerged from ships, each soul shuffling toward auction blocks. More than forty percent of all enslaved Africans first stepped foot in the United States through this dock. Between 1670 and 1808, nearly one thousand ships containing cargos of enslaved Africans entered the port. According to the International African American Museum, which now sits on top of the wharf's location, approximately eighty percent of present-day descendants of enslaved

people can trace an ancestor back to their arrival in Charleston. Even if barbecue didn't begin in the "Holy City," many Black people who slaughter hogs and tend hot coals overnight have a connection to the town. Contemporary barbecue knowledge is ancestral.

Beauty and brutality were wrapped together and baked into the bricks that line the streets of this city, from the old Ryan Slave Mart to the Battery. The fingerprints of the enslaved people who formed, baked, and laid the bricks of Charleston's historic buildings are still visible to those who know what to look for. That same labor force helped fine-tune the cooking method of American barbecue.

Reverend Irving E. Lowery's *Life on the Old Plantation in Ante-Bellum Days, or a Story Based on Fact* underscores the notion that Black people did this hot, dirty work. Born in 1850 in Sumter County, Lowery detailed a rare celebratory meal meant to mark the wedding of two enslaved people. "Uncle Tom, the father of the groom, was an expert at barbecuing. He did a lot of it for the white folks, especially on occasions of general musters, weddings, picnics, etc.," Lowery wrote.

Oral histories from enslaved people collected by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) during the 1930s revealed how barbecue methods were refined. Wesley Jones' oral history, taken in Union, South Carolina, details his process of cooking hogs ahead of celebrations:

> Night befo' dem barbecues, I used to stay up all night a-cooking and basting de meats wid barbecue sass (sauce). It made of vinegar, black and red pepper, salt, butter, a little sage, coriander, basil, onion, and garlic. Some folks drop a little sugar in it. On a long pronged stick I wraps a soft rag or cotton fer a swab, and all de night long I swabs dat meat 'till it drip into de fire. Dem drippings change de smoke into seasoned fumes dat smoke de meat. We turn de meat over and swab it dat way all night long 'till it ooze seasoning and bake all through.

This tradition of Black cooks keeping the flame in the antebellum South shows up repeatedly. But newspaper coverage from the same period often featured white entrepreneurs who capitalized on Black barbecue techniques or relied on underpaid Black labor to do the work. Later, segregation allowed white businessowners to exclude Blacks from restaurants. By the twentieth century, white men tended to receive a disproportionate share of barbecue fame and fortune.

So much of what makes barbecue special is

ephemeral. We eat the food. Pit-hearths are covered after they've served their original purpose. The labor that made the experience possible seems to vanish like smoke.

But how does the legacy endure? My last stop was in Charleston was Rodney Scott's Whole Hog BBQ. Scott isn't from the city but was reared in the Lowcountry. His restaurant sits on the upper portion of King Street, not far from Interstate 26. Inside, tourists rubbed elbows with old-school barbecue aficionados who took their caps off when they crossed the threshold. The simple gesture felt both polite and reverential. This is one of a handful of Black establishments in the country that still barbecues the old way.

"I saw my father and my great-uncle doing it for years before they let me do it on my own when I was eleven," Scott writes in *Rodney Scott's World of BBQ*. His family has cooked hogs as long as he can remember. Growing up in Hemingway, South Carolina, almost two hours from Charleston, for Scott, cooking hogs was a pastime transferred from father to son. There are no shortcuts, and it takes years to hone the technique. The tools of the trade are often simple. Old oil drums are bent into service to transform logs to hot coals. Wire fencing is laid across cinder block–lined pits to form meat racks. A mop, very similar to the stick-and-rag mop Wesley Jones used while he was enslaved, keeps the leaner parts of the pig from drying out.

"One of the great things about cooking whole hog is that it takes so long to do it, that you just naturally gather around the pit with good friends and fellowship while the meat and wood do their thing," Scott wrote. He tries to recreate that vibe inside his Charleston establishment, the first in a growing chain that will soon open its sixth location.

While waiting for my pork sandwich plate I people watched, trying to discern the Charlestonians from the weekenders. When my food was ready, I took it to a picnic table outside. Somehow the scene of children playing while their parents waited for thir orders, R&B music playing over the speakers, reminded me of childhood family reunions. We don't do those anymore. Much of my family is dead or long gone from Newberry. The produce stand is no more. What remains is a deep appreciation for my ancestors, who built the foundation of this country and continued pursue personhood accross centuries of inhumane treatment. There are so many stories wrapped up in this pork sandwich, in my memories, and in me. This history can't be reduced to a slogan on a serving tray. By writing about it, I want to make it visible, to keep it alive.

Latria Graham is a contributing editor for Garden & Gun *and* Outside *magazines. Her upcoming book,* Uneven Ground*, which explores Black landownership and land loss through the lens of her own family's farm, will be published by Mariner Press.*