

Mitchell, E.R.: Backyard Barbecue ^[1]

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E.R. Mitchell: Backyard Barbecue

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 10/8/2000. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

E.R. "Mitch" Mitchell is the proprietor of Mitchell's Barbecue Restaurant in Wilson. Barbecue is one of the most cherished of all Southern foods, and Mitchell's is one of the few places that still fixes the unique, Eastern North Carolina-style of barbecue the old-fashioned way: pit-cooked all night over hickory or oak coals, basted with a homemade vinegar and pepper sauce, pulled from the bone, chopped and served hot.

The passion for barbecue goes deep into our history. When Spanish explorers first came to the Americas, they found Indians roasting meat over open fires on wooden frames and gave a name to it, barbacoa. Barbecued pig was already a delicacy in Eastern North Carolina in Colonial days, and later -- for reasons Mitchell explains -- reached its highest art form wherever farmers raised tobacco.

While I finished up a plate of barbecue and garden-fresh collard greens, Mitchell recalled when his restaurant's first master pit man, an elderly gentleman named James Kirby, began to teach him the old ways of cooking barbecue.

In E.R. Mitchell's words:



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That first night we cooked a pig together, when the coals got real good and hot, Mr. Kirby aligned them around the base of the cooker, then he spread the hickory wood on top. We put the grate down, and we rubbed the pig with salt, and then we came back that morning about 4:30 and opened the lid up, and it was the prettiest pig you'd ever want to lay your eyes on! It was so done, it was falling off the bone! We flipped it over and it had just enough temperature to crisp the back. He had to get his way of cooking from a further back tradition than I did. He was cooking pigs before I was even born. That was just a way of life back then. Mr. Kirby fine-tuned the techniques I knew, and showed me a few other ones. It's a different way of life. In the hard days of putting in the tobacco or picking the cotton, everybody came together. Everybody became one. It didn't make any difference who owned the crop, but the one purpose in mind was to finish it and to do an excellent job. And Wilson is the barbecue capital of the world, and that is how our tradition of barbecue came about. You got to celebrate. You got to show the workers how much you appreciate them. Everybody is all happy because the crop is in, and now we have a hog killing. Every so often, we'd have a barbecue at hog killings too. People would come together and they would help one another: You help me slaughter mine, and I help you slaughter yours, and then we exchange meats. While we're doing that, we're talking. When I was growing up, in the '40s, we did barbecue at Christmastime, too. The crops were in, money was flourishing and it was a time to celebrate. Everybody would gather in groups and they would go house to house visiting. They would come to the house and they would cook. Cooking a pig was like -- how can I say it? -- it was almost like riding a bicycle. Everybody knew how to cook a pig back then. The only thing was, some people could cook it better than other ones. There were some guys that really prided themselves on it. There was a fellow by name of Mr. Woodard, used to cook them quite a bit. Mr. Tom Woodard. He used to own a nightclub where everybody would go and celebrate. That was a living legend -- "Tom's Place." That was the local and only nightspot. I can remember my father's sisters and brothers always coming home during Christmastime. I was a little boy, and they would be in there getting dressed, getting ready to go to Tom's. Tom would have already been cooking for days. When you go to Tom's, it's a funny thing, but in the South you worked side by side with your white counterparts in tobacco barns. You felt the pain that the other man felt. It didn't make any difference what color he was during those moments. You had a common bond. Everything but the barbecue. That's where the color line sort of blended. If you were having a barbecue and you wanted to invite me as your black friend, or a person who worked for you, it didn't matter. That was not going to raise any outcry. I've heard the story of how Mr. Scott, the famous black barbecue chef over in Goldsboro, got started. Believe it or not, he started selling it out of his back door. I remember a white gentleman making a joke out of it, saying that white people use

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