

**The Slaw and  
the Slow Cooked**  
*Culture and Barbecue  
in the Mid-South*

EDITED BY JAMES R. VETETO  
AND EDWARD M. MACLIN

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## Southern Barbecue Sauce and Heirloom Tomatoes

JAMES R. VETETO

### The Origins of Southern Barbecue Sauce

Barbecue sauce is a noteworthy and controversial topic to Southern minds. As he has with so many other topics related to Southern barbecue, John Shelton Reed (with help from his wife, Dale Volberg Reed) has made a thorough investigation into the historical origins of barbecue sauce across the region. Reed and Reed summarize the basics of barbecue sauce fixings in their 2008 book *Holy Smoke*:

People have been using marinades to tenderize roasted meat, mops and finishing sauces to moisten it, and all three to enhance its flavor since time immemorial. These concoctions have almost always begun with a mildly acidic base of wine, vinegar, or lemon or other fruit juice, and then added something salty—salt, soy sauce, fermented fish sauce (the Romans' favorite)—and something spicy like red or black pepper, ginger, cinnamon, or cloves. Optional ingredients have included sweeteners, garlic or something in the onion line, and maybe some butter, lard, or oil to replace the fat lost in cooking and to help the sauce adhere. The tomato was a relatively late addition, and of course it's still controversial in North Carolina, but put *all* this stuff in, and you've got something like the commercial sauces that line supermarket shelves today. (24)

Modern barbecue sauces have precedents that stretch back into antiquity. A medieval table sauce for meat from around 1430 contained vinegar, the sour juice of unripe grapes, and spices including powdered

black pepper, ginger, and cinnamon. By the 1700s sauce makers started calling their tomato-free concoctions “ketchup,” and often used a variety of ingredients including vinegar, white wine, lemon peel, pepper, cloves, ginger, mace, nutmeg, anchovies, and shallots. English cookbooks from the 1780s and 1790s include variations on how to barbecue pork by roasting it beside a fire and collecting the drippings, basting the pork with red wine all the while. The wine and juices from the dripping pan were taken for sauce stock, and combined with lemon, sweet herbs, anchovies, butter, and other ingredients. The resulting sauce was boiled, strained, and served hot. In eighteenth-century colonial America, Virginians and Carolinians were cooking whole hogs and basting them with saltwater and butter, and this is likely the type of simple meat moisturizer that George Washington was fond of using on his barbecue. An 1824 cookbook reported that barbecue pork was being served with something more akin to gravy than the barbecue sauces we know today. Ingredients included water, red wine, garlic, salt, pepper, mushroom ketchup, and butter, all of which were thickened with flour (Reed and Reed 2008).

True vinegar and pepper sauces may have originated in the West Indies, where chili peppers were encountered by early European colonists. In 1698 it was reported that a feast was put on by natives who were cooking pigs that had been brought over from Europe and had naturalized. A mop of lemon juice, salt, and chili peppers was used, and the pork was served with a table sauce consisting of the same ingredients available in hot or mild strengths. The taste for peppers may have been brought to Southeastern American shores by Creoles or slaves from the West Indies islands and combined with vinegar as a replacement for hard-to-find lemon juice. By 1767 Thomas Jefferson was growing cayenne peppers at Monticello, and by 1812 he was also growing “Bull Nose” and “Major” pepper varieties. He also made vinegar from grapes by the forty-gallon batch, and mentioned steeping peppers in vinegar for use as a meat seasoning in his journals. Jefferson’s concoctions may have been among the early predecessors of the style of barbecue sauce that is still found in eastern North Carolina today. The basic mix of peppers, lemon juice or vinegar, and butter or lard caught on quickly in early America and by 1830 was widespread among the Southern states (Reed and Reed 2008; Moss, Chapter 2, this volume). Of course, even then, special ingredients such as apple cider vinegar, whiskey, and “secret herbs” were being added to barbecue sauces and “dips,” beginning a

long tradition of trade secrets protected by Southern barbecue saucers that continues unabated today.

### Current Sauce Geographies

By the early twentieth century, the relative uniformity of Southern barbecue sauces began to change as the restaurant business gained momentum and regional styles of preparing and serving barbecue took on a more particular and unique character (Moss, Chapter 2, this volume; Egerton 1987). Saucers at barbecue restaurants began perfecting their own secret concoctions. This tradition had its origins in the colonial period but reached new heights as commercially oriented barbecue joints began to pop up across the land. Recipes were handed down from master to apprentice and either memorized by a select few or locked down in secret and safe places. Hand-me-down stories and mythologies began to swirl around the sauces, such as the one about the traveler in Hot Springs, Arkansas, who paid his monthlong hotel bill with a barbecue sauce recipe that catalyzed the McClard’s Bar-B-Q dynasty (McClard’s 2009), or the secret sauce used at the St. Patrick’s Irish Picnic in McEwen, Tennessee, rumored variously to have originated in Ireland or developed locally in the 1920s (Bradley-Shurtz, Chapter 5, this volume).

Moving from east to west across the American South puts you in touch with a kaleidoscope of barbecue sauce geographies, distinct but not entirely unique, overlapping with each other like the waves of human migration and ethnicity that have helped shape their development. On the east coast of North Carolina, where minimalism is the motto and goal, minced whole-hog barbecue is served with a vinegar-based sauce that is only lightly seasoned with pepper flakes and a few other secret ingredients, some as *risqué* as scotch or moonshine. The idea is to let the meat do the talking and to use the sauce sparingly as an understated complement. This Coastal Plain style of barbecue is available to lesser degrees in South Carolina and Georgia, where it is served, as in North Carolina, with a mixed-meat-and-vegetable concoction called Brunswick stew. Eastern-style North Carolina barbecue is apparently a descendant of the original Southern barbecue that was developed in the Tidewater area of Virginia, but is for all intents and purposes extinct there today (Moss, Chapter 2, this volume). If you travel westward into the Carolina Piedmont things start to get a little more interesting; at least to my mind. Tomato is added to the vinegar in small amounts,

and locals call the sauce “dip,” an apparent carryover from a more ancient way of labeling sauces, “dipney” (Reed and Reed 2008). Other “secret ingredients” start popping up in increasing numbers, making the sauce options more varied. Down about Charlotte and moving into north and central South Carolina, and sporadically in Georgia, a mustard-based barbecue sauce becomes the regional specialty. Henry’s Smokehouse in Greenville, South Carolina, features a classic, dark yellow, tangy mustard-based sauce with red and black flecks of pepper mixed in, available in hot or mild degrees of spiciness. Outside of the mustard-based region, barbecue sauces in South Carolina and Georgia are a mishmash of styles—generally tending toward very vinegary tomato-based sauces, with a more frequent use of tomato and sugar than in the Carolina Piedmont.

Getting into the Appalachian Mountains of western North Carolina and East Tennessee, one notices perhaps the first clear break from the Eastern and Piedmont traditions altogether: Although you certainly do find sauces in the mountains akin to the Piedmont dip, it is also the first area where you consistently encounter a thick tomato-and-molasses-based barbecue sauce in the geography of traditional Southern barbecue. (Of course these days, with the trend toward chain restaurants and barbecue mobility, you are likely to encounter any style of barbecue in any region more frequently.) Perhaps the most famous and quintessential example of this style can be found at Ridgewood Barbecue in Bluff City, Tennessee, where a barbecue platter consists of thinly sliced pieces of smoked ham drizzled in a dark red, sticky-sweet sauce with home-cut french fries piled in a poetic mess on top (Vetere and MacIain 2009).

In areas of Alabama it has been firmly documented that there are barbecue sauces that are mayonnaise based, but I have never stumbled across any establishments that served it. The closest I came was at Shemwell’s Barbecue in Cairo, in far southern Illinois on the banks of the Mississippi River, where the barbecue was served grilled between two pieces of butter-slathered bread like a grilled cheese sandwich and the sliced pork was covered in a spicy white sauce. The sauce appeared to be a mayonnaise-based concoction with tomato and mustard mixed in minimally (the waitress wouldn’t even give me a clue as to the ingredients), which to my surprise and delight was tasty. Shemwell’s sauce seemed akin to what other writers have penned about Alabama mayonnaise-based sauces.

Heading west of Nashville, Tennessee, will land you in West Ten-

nessee, where the barbecue is cooked whole-hog, slaw is served on the sandwiches, and the density of barbecue joints greatly increases. For a rural area there is a ridiculously high number of barbecue joints. In the urban heart of the Barbecue Belt, Memphis, the smoked pork is shouder instead of whole-hog and is available at a hundred or so restaurants around the city. Memphis is also host to the most famous barbecue competition in the world, Memphis in May, held annually on the banks of the Mississippi River just off Beale Street (Vetere and MacIain 2009). By this point in our hypothetical barbecue sauce journey, we have reached the Mid-South. Beyond it in Texas and Kansas City, one finds barbecue sauces that increase decisively in their levels of sweetness and beef, rather than pork, as the dominant meat of choice. But those areas are topics for another time and another author. My particular subject matter is Mid-South barbecue, and my muse is her sauces. Let’s take a closer look.

### Mid-South Barbecue Sauce

As we argued in the introduction to this volume, the quintessential Mid-South barbecue sauce is a seamless blending of four key ingredients that I like to call the “Big Four”: tomato, vinegar, spicy pepper, and sweetener of choice. In order to test my theory of Mid-South barbecue sauciness, I interviewed Phillip McClard, the third-generation sauce maker at McClard’s Bar-B-Q in Hot Springs, Arkansas—home to perhaps the most famous barbecue sauce in all of the Mid-South. When I told him my theory of the perfect Mid-South barbecue sauce (which I freely admit is heavily influenced by having grown up eating at McClard’s since about age three), Phillip confirmed my general suspicions, without giving up the particulars of his own famous secret family recipe:

*Phillip:* I’m not too crazy about the real vinegary stuff either. I mean we do put vinegar in ours, we do, but . . . every bit of that [tomato, vinegar, pepper, sugar] goes into ours. Plus some more stuff. But yeah, every bit that what you said goes in there. And don’t forget water [*laughs*], put a lot of water.

*Me:* You guys are kind of somewhat in between those flavors with a little more heat than some.

*Phillip:* Yeah. And sometimes I’ll rub my toe and put a little too

much of something in a bucket, you know, that happens when you're in here at three thirty or four o' clock in the morning and your mind ain't working real good like it should, you might forget or you might put a little bit too much of something and it might be a little hotter sometimes than other times. That's just like if you made anything at home, you know if you made something at home sometimes it'll vary, it's all gonna vary sometimes.

Southern food writer John Egerton has found McClard's sauce to be "a nicely balanced blend of thickness, hotness, sweetness, and tartness" (1987, 153). In other words, the perfect Mid-South barbecue sauce.

Although McClard's sauce is representative of an ideal blending of the four key ingredients to Mid-South sauces, there is significant variation throughout the region. Each variation typically highlights one of the other three ingredients (excepting tomato, which is nearly ubiquitous): sweetener, spice (various peppers), or vinegar. At Stubby's Bar-B-Que and Purty Bar-B-Q in Hot Springs, you get a sweeter tomato-based sauce, and at Mickey's Bar-B-Q you get a fairly balanced Mid-South sauce that is a darker brick red than McClard's bright pink. Over in Conway, Arkansas, at Hog Pen BBQ they serve a red sauce containing molasses that is on the sweet side but not overbearingly so. It tends more toward a sauce style typical of Kansas City or Texas. Down in the Timberlands of South Arkansas, sauces are on the sweeter side and brick red to orange in color, indicative of the region's closer proximity to the Texas border (Nolan, Chapter 4, this volume). Interstate Bar-B-Q in Memphis is known for its secret sauce that is close to the consistency of tomato paste with some heat to it, and Charlie Vergos's Rendezvous, although more famous for its dry-rub ribs, has a darkish red sauce for its pulled-pork sandwiches that fits pretty squarely in the middle of the Big Four with a hint of mustard.

Though my sauce theory for the Mid-South in my experience is generally true, it must also be said that there are some outliers. Scott's Parker's Barbecue in Lexington, Tennessee, has a vinegary sauce that is light on tomato with a slight bit of heat in the affertrate. Such sauces are fairly common in rural West Tennessee. They are more akin to the vinegar-based dips that you encounter in Lexington, North Carolina, 545 miles to the east, than they are to the tomato-based sauces of Memphis, 111 miles to the west, and the rest of the Mid-South. At Sim's Bar-B-Que in Little Rock, Arkansas, they prepare their chopped-



McClard's sauce painting. Photo by James Veleto.

pork sandwich on two slices of white bread doused with a tangy, bright yellow mustard-based sauce, the only one of its kind that I know of other than Old Hickory's mustard-based sauce down in South Arkansas (Nolan, Chapter 4, this volume). Some barbecue restaurants in the Mid-South, however, flirt dangerously with mustard as a key ingredient without going all the way. Craig's Barbecue in De Valls Bluff, Arkansas, en route between Little Rock and Memphis, features a mixed tomato-and-mustard-based sauce, available in hot, medium, or mild. Craig's secret blend also contains a variety of other unique ingredients, including pork fat drippings and green peppers.

As seen in the examples above, Mid-South barbecue sauces can vary greatly in flavor, color, texture, and ingredients. Despite all of this variation and the occasional outlier, I'll stake my reputation on a theory that places the bulk of the region's sauces somewhere in between the Big Four, with tendencies toward one or the other. My own family's secret sauce fits squarely within that definition, attempting to achieve the perfect balance midway between all four elements. Perhaps this unique character of our barbecue sauces is another reason why they call this region the Mid-South.

I would like to close this section with a poem that I wrote about my

family's barbecue sauce, and I suggest that barbecue sauces in general are a worthy subject of the poetic senses. Though I have seen some fine poetry celebrating the virtues of Southern barbecue in general (e.g., York 2004; Applewhite 2004; Marion 2004), I am not aware of any that focus on sauce in particular. Poetry, of course, can touch us in ways that prose and other rational pursuits cannot and can convey a deep sense of meaning and satisfaction to those who enjoy it. The same, I would argue, can be said of a properly prepared Mid-South barbecue sauce.

*Colonel Neff's Sauce*

It all started  
when my grandparents were buzzed on booze  
one evening at cocktail hour  
over fifty years ago.

"We can make a better sauce than you can buy at the store."

I think it was that old-timey, self-sufficing attitude  
of the World War II generation  
that done it.

Now four generations later  
my little son and I choke together  
as the air is hot with skillet roasted peppers  
and my wife slowly mixes it up in the kitchen.

I think back to fishin'  
blackberry pies, homegrown tomatoes  
and evening boat rides.

Big huge family meals  
fried apples  
potato salad  
rice pilaf  
coleslaw  
butter-slabb'd corn on the cob  
and banana split ice cream sundaes.

Smell of gardenias in the air  
hot, muggy summer evenings  
chirp of crickets in the grass  
chasing lightning bugs through the dusk  
and oh that lip-smackin' sauce!

The perfect blend  
of tomato, vinegar, sweet, and spice  
nothing like it.

People been bugging me for years for the recipe,  
offering me all manner of family secrets in exchange.

But I just can't do it  
—I'm not usually like this—  
but this is our thing,  
a family thing.

And as I choke on air  
and smell the tang  
and my taste buds wake in joyful anticipation  
this bright, Southern mountain morning

I think of my grandparents  
somewhere better  
sitting at a better table, at cocktail hour  
sipping martinis and bourbon  
then fixing dinner

*smokin'* them ribs over hot coals  
with that super tangy barbecue sauce that's still in demand

down here  
four generations later.

### What Is Old Is New Again: Southern Heirloom Tomatoes

While in the main I agree with Reed and Reed's (2008) contention that regional barbecue traditions should be left alone by both the rise of fast-food industries and the more recent developments in foodie-based Slow Food and sustainability movements, I can't help but temper my agreement with two main exceptions—Southern heirloom tomatoes (in subregions that use tomato-based products in their sauces) and Southern heritage animal breeds. Although both of these are time-honored traditions throughout the American South, they have been rendered almost extinct in their contemporary usage by both more modern and traditional barbecue restaurants alike. I think this should change, and for several good reasons. In this section I will introduce some of the main varieties of Southern heirloom tomatoes that I am most familiar with and give suggestions for incorporating them back into our barbecue sauce traditions moving forward.

I have been both a gardener and a committed conservationist of Southern heirloom vegetable varieties since 1996. I served as the coordinator for the Southern Seed Legacy Project at the University of Georgia from 2005 to 2008 (I now direct the project at its new home at the University of North Texas) and have conducted thesis and dissertation research on the heirloom vegetable and fruit heritage of the southern Appalachian and Ozark Mountains over the past seven years. Along the way, as both a farmer and researcher, I have encountered an amazing variety of flavors, colors, shapes, sizes, and growing characteristics in Southern heirloom tomato varieties. This tremendous variety in Southern tomatoes has the potential to affect the flavor of barbecue sauces in numerous ways. Probably the most tangible is the sweetness and acidity factor. I have found generally that mountain people in the South like pink or yellow tomato varieties, which tend to be sweeter and therefore less acidic in flavor, while lowland Southerners prefer a more acidic tomato, generally red in color. That's not to say that mountaineers don't grow red tomatoes or that lowlanders don't grow pink or yellow tomatoes. My own preference is for sweet, meaty pink tomatoes, particularly of the Rose or Brandywine variety, and they are what I use in my own family's barbecue sauce recipe.

I will focus here mainly on mountain heirloom varieties and their characteristics because they are what I am most familiar with, but I encourage all Southerners to seek out Southern heirloom tomato varieties

that may still be available in their own localities (mainly through elderly seed savers) and to incorporate them into their barbecue sauce recipes. Given the current economic climate, this is probably only feasible for home gardeners and sauce makers and maybe a few "gourmet" barbecue restaurateurs, but if we join together and keep these treasured heirlooms in circulation in our culinary traditions it can only be hoped that they will once again be eaten by a majority of Southerners in the future. In fact, programs like the Renewing America's Food Traditions (RAFT) alliance are working hard to make sure that heirloom foods are being incorporated back into American markets (Nabhan 2008). And I can assure you, a barbecue sauce made with heirloom tomato paste is a different, and better, animal than one that is made with ketchup. That is one secret of my family's sauce that I am proud to share, in the hope that it stimulates others to help preserve our region's last remaining heirloom tomatoes before they are lost to history. Let me introduce you below to a few of my favorite heirloom tomato varieties that I have collected, swapped for, and become otherwise acquainted with throughout the years.

*Red Oxheart.* This tomato has a unique shape thought to look like an ox heart. It used to be the main canning tomato in Ashe County, North Carolina, and is still mainly used for that purpose. It is great for making tomato sauce, barbecue sauce, and salsa. It also makes good juice because it stays uniform and does not separate in the can. It is easy to de-seed and doesn't fall apart in boiling water because it is very meaty. Red Oxheart is a late ripening tomato.

*Beefheart.* This large tomato is red on the top half and purple on the bottom half and has a very good taste to it. The bottom half of the tomato tapers to a point, which makes it have a heart shape. It is a long tomato that is greater in length than it is in width. It is a very rough-looking tomato (especially on the blossom end) that will cartace. It has been passed down in the Bradford family of Bald Mountain, North Carolina, for over a hundred years and is rumored to have originated with German settlers in the area. Beefheart is a very good sauce tomato.

*Brandywine.* A very big pink tomato that is sweeter than regular red varieties. Among other things, it makes a good green tomato cake, which you bake in the fall once the cooler weather sets in and makes the green tomatoes sweeter. Southern families eat the green top of the tomato fried as well. It has been grown by families in the Green Valley Community of Ashe County, North Carolina, for at least a hundred years, and it is speculated by locals that it was brought in by German settlers.



Brandywine is a regular taste-test winner at tomato competitions for its sweet and full flavor and was a commercial variety introduced in Philadelphia by the seed firm of Johnson and Stokes in 1889 (Weaver 1997). A rumor among the seed-saving community has Brandywine originating in Amish communities, and it is hard to know where Johnson and Stokes got the original seed stock that they improved upon. In any case, it has been grown long enough in North Carolina and other areas to have adapted to local conditions and qualify as a Southern heirloom. I grow another type of tomato, Rose, that is similar in taste and texture to Pink Brandywine for inclusion in my own family's barbecue sauce recipe.

*Cow Tits.* A red tomato that looks like a roma but is more square. It hangs off the vine like a cow teat and ripens from the bottom up, which makes it look like it has a nipple when it is first ripening. It is mealy and good for sauce, canning, and salsa and produces earlier than Red Oxheart for canning. It has been grown for generations in the North Carolina mountains.

*Mister Strikey.* This is a big knotty yellow tomato with a red core and stripes running through it. It is a sweeter variety. Troy McCoury of Burnsville, North Carolina, obtained it thirty-five years ago from Selman Hensley and has been growing it ever since. He introduced it to the H.P.S. seed company, and they made it commercially available. It originally came to North Carolina from Virginia and probably before that came from Pennsylvania, likely having Amish origins. It is very similar to other Southern tomato varieties such as German Johnson, Hillbilly, Pineapple, Georgia Streak, Strikey, Candystripe, and Old German, but they each have slight variations and preferences among Southern gardeners. Mister Strikey is good for sweeter sauces and makes them yellow in color. It is also grown in the Arkansas Ozarks.

The five varieties described above are just a small number of the many heirloom tomatoes that are still being grown in the American South today. They are mostly being grown by home gardeners of the elderly generation who grew up in farming families. Many of these seed savers are in their last few years of being able to maintain a garden and have no one left in their families to pass their seeds on to. If we can reincorporate some of this agricultural biodiversity back into regional culinary dishes such as barbecue sauces, we will be engaging in delicious acts of what Gary Paul Nabhan has called "eater-based conservation" (2008, 2). Heirloom tomatoes are of interest not only because of their fine culinary qualities but also because they are infused with important

familial and Southern cultural histories (Nazarea 2005). When we use them in our lives and keep the seeds and stories going, we are actively keeping these important cultural memories alive.

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