



WILBER'S BARBECUE: "IT'S ALL SMOKIN'"

Eddie Ward
and Wilber Shirley
checking the
equipment

You can smell it before you see it. And that's a good thing because if you didn't smell Wilber's Barbecue Restaurant, you might miss it, never knowing that you had passed a revered shrine of barbecue. Wilber's has no golden arches and doesn't advertise on national television. The restaurant sits humbly about one hundred feet off U.S. 70 by-pass in Goldsboro, NC, amid a chaotic cluster of businesses strung out along the road, reminiscent of a scene from the 1950s. It's a favorite stop for North Carolina Symphony musicians on their travels to the coast.

Indeed, to pork lovers, Wilber's represents a tradition that refuses to give in to change. Once you've figured out how to roast a pig properly, why mess it up by changing it? Pigs and how to cook them have loomed large in North Carolina since colonial times. In his *Secret History of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina*, William Byrd (1674-1744) indicates how serious we were about pig from the beginning.

"We found Cap't Willis here, whose errand it was to buy Pork, which is the Staple Commodity of North Carolina, and which with Pitch and Tar makes up the whole of their Traffick. The Truth of it is, these People live so much upon Swine's flesh, that it don't only incline them to the Yaws, and consequently the downfall of their noses, but makes them likewise extremely hoggish in their Temper, and many of them seem to Grunt rather than Speak in their ordinary conversation."

In one stinging paragraph William Byrd has given us some important information: we have had a penchant for pork from the beginning; the tar, as in "Tar Heel," was the real goeey stuff; it is hard for us to act snooty (as Virginians are prone to do)

BY JIMMY J. GILMORE | PHOTOS BY MICHAEL ZIRKLE

because it is difficult to present an aloof air with a fallen nose; we have a hoggish temper; and the North Carolina version of a Southern accent is tantamount to grunting.

Okay. For now we'll take the high road, ignore the insults, and deal with truly important things, like Mr. Wilber Shirley's restaurant and his barbecue. Which brings us to an important point to make for all the uninitiated Yankees in our midst. In North Carolina the word barbecue is a noun, as in, "Let's go down to Wilber's and get us a mess of barbecue." Get it? Barbecue is a something. It exists on a plate or in a sandwich, accompanied by a host of side dishes, like cole slaw, boiled potatoes, greens of some sort cooked with fatback, sometimes Brunswick Stew, and always, always hush puppies. Yes, barbecue is a verb too, and we can all pretty much agree that it refers to the perfectly natural act of cooking meat over heat. Millions barbecue, but that doesn't mean they produce a substance worthy of the appellation, "barbecue."

Wilber's is a natural stopping point on the way to the beach. And even though it is faster for some to take Interstate 40 for their beach vacations, many people will actually go the slower route through Goldsboro just to stop off at Wilber's. The restaurant itself might escape notice, but what causes a carnivore to jam on the brakes is the aroma emanating from the pit house in back of the building, where pork is roasting slowly over oak coals. It is the oak wood flavor that distinguishes Wilber's from all others. Of course, we're talking Eastern North Carolina, so the barbecue is chopped, not shredded. And the sauce uses vinegar as a base, not tomatoes, as some of our neighbors in Western North Carolina inexplicably prefer. On a recent visit Mr. Shirley stated the rule plainly for those who haven't caught on yet, "You don't put ketchup on pork, and you don't put vinegar on beef." Wilber's own sauce is one of the best blends of vinegar and hot red peppers available, and is essential for those whose palates lust for more zing.

To dine at Wilber's is to take a step back in time. Trendy types might refer to the atmosphere as "retro." But that would ignore the simple fact that the place hasn't changed much in forty-six years. Wilber's

was "retro" before "retro" was cool. The restaurant was small when it first opened. Over the years, both ends of the building have been extended to accommodate the throngs of customers. The seating capacity now is 325 – just crowded enough to be cozy, but not jam-packed like a sports bar on game night.

The first thing you notice is the pine paneling that covers the walls. Doubtless the tone of the wood has darkened over many decades, but the paneling has become a signature of Wilber's, as essential to the ambience as the barbecue is to the taste. "I've threatened to rip it all out, but so many people objected that I had to forget it. They all said they didn't want

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the restaurant to change." Patrons naturally feel much more secure knowing that some things in life will remain steadfast and true. That goes for the red-checked tablecloths; the bar at which you can eat barbecue and drink sweet tea, but not beer; the take out station to the left of the cash register; and the linoleum floor, which is worn down to the essence of whatever it is that linoleum is made of. The décor is decidedly late 50s, early 60s, and it's going to stay that way!

There are some curious areas in the restaurant that are the result of additions to the building. One of the funniest is the location of "additional restrooms." In order to reach them, customers must pass through a narrow hallway that also happens to be Mr. Shirley's office. It is no secret where to find the office safe and the adding machine! In another area, customers seem perfectly unconcerned when they are seated adjacent to a door with a sign that reads, "DANGER: HIGH VOLTAGE." As a decorating theme, the homage to pig extends to nearly every

corner of the restaurant. There is also plenty of evidence that Mr. Shirley is an avid NC State fan. The atmosphere is very casual and unassuming which is why it has become a second home to several generations of Wayne County residents.

The waitresses (there are no male servers at Wilber's) bustle about in a hurry, but they never seem to neglect the customer. The service always feels personal, and I can't count how many times I've been asked, "What y'all havin' today, honey?" That sounds Southern to my ears, and it seems mighty friendly, and welcoming. When the waitress says, "Okay sweetie, you're havin' the large pork plate, boiled potatoes, cole slaw, a side of chicken gravy, and iced tea," I hear a perfect recitation of my order, and William Byrd notwithstanding, it doesn't sound like grunting, or evidence of a "hoggish temper."

The food comes out quickly because the pig was slow cooked out back in the pit house the previous night by Pitmaster Leamon Parks. Mr. Parks, of kindly face, has spent twenty-eight years working in the pit house, and is a master chef in the world of barbecue. However, his workspace surely qualifies as one of the most unusual on the planet. He is so dedicated to his work that he comes in on his day off to clean equipment. Wilber's is home to him, as it is to many long-time employees.

The pit house, a small rectangular building, is the third in the history of Wilber's, the others having burned to the ground. In a nod to safety, the low ceiling is dotted with a sprinkler system. It is hot in the pit house and the air is "code orange," saturated with smoke, but the smell is divine. Cooking the pig with consistent results is the most important job at the restaurant. If not done properly, Wilber's would be just another grub house along the side of the road.

The pigs are split and placed inside down on a rack over oak coals. The smoke flavor comes from the grease falling on the coals and creating smoke, which rises and permeates the meat. After about six hours, the pig is turned skin side to the fire. All in all, it takes eight to ten hours to complete the process. The meat is brought inside and chopped in a room next to the surprisingly modern kitchen



Above (left to right): Musicians Jimmy Gilmore, Liz Beilman, Paul Goldsberry chat with Wilber Shirley
Below: Liz Beilman and Paul Goldsberry anticipate their barbeque.



where the cooks prepare hush puppies, potatoes, slaw, and other dishes on the menu. How many restaurants nowadays invest that amount of time preparing their featured dish? This traditional way of slow cooking has been handed down from generation to generation since Colonial times.

On a recent visit to Wilber's, I asked Mr. Shirley to clarify what is meant by the expression, "whole hog" barbecue. After all, the use of this phrase has discouraged many a potential pork lover from eating barbecue, conjuring as it does, images of snouts, ears, tails and hooves being mixed into the finished product. Even after globe-trotting chef Anthony Bourdain declared in a recent interview that he was a purist and preferred "whole hog" Eastern North Carolina Barbecue above all others, most squeamish types still said, "uck," to 'cue. Relax, you shrinking violets. Mr. Shirley made it clear that while the whole hog is cooked, only the most desirable parts,

shoulders and hams mainly, are chopped and mixed together. "The shoulders are a little darker and greasier, the hams are drier. If you used just the hams, the meat would be too dry." So, it is reasonable to conclude that any undesirable parts of the pig that appear in "whole hog" barbecue are purely coincidental and unintended.

Mr. Shirley declares that, "the restaurant has built its reputation on the loyalty of working-class people. I dress like my customers. They wouldn't feel at home if I were dressed all fancy." That said, he was quick to assure me that everyone is welcome, including those of us in the North Carolina Symphony who often stop by for dinner on our way to play a concert in Kinston or New Bern. Obviously we get a lot of looks from other customers when we enter the restaurant clad in tuxes and long black dresses. Some of the diners are bold enough to ask us questions like, "are you boys goin' to a funeral, or comin' from one?" Looking around the restaurant you get the feeling that it is only Southern politeness keeping the regulars from saying, "You boys need to know that Raleigh is 60 miles up the road."

After 46 years, Mr. Shirley has seen it all. He has, in his words, "fed President George H. W. Bush and 3,300 others" at nearby Seymour Johnson Air Force Base during "Operation Desert Storm." Former President Clinton has dined at the restaurant, and Mr. Shirley counts as personal friends the present and former governors, legislators, and college coaches. Famous people aside, the backbone of his business has always been the working-class folk of Wayne County.

When the North Carolina Symphony recently played a pair of education concerts in Goldsboro, several groups from the orchestra went to Wilber's for lunch. Three of us arrived first and randomly chose our own table. The second wave of musicians arrived shortly and stood around dutifully until one of the waitresses appeared from the kitchen and said, "Y'all go ahead and sit anywhere you want." One of the musicians asked if they could be seated in the non-smoking section. Warmly, but without any hint of apology in her voice the waitress replied, "Honey, it's all smokin'."

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