

# Jim Early has written the book on Tar Heel barbecue

Jim Early is no ordinary man. His life reads like that of a novel's adventure hero — painter, writer, dancer, and car restorer. This North Carolina

## CREATIVE COOKING



SANDRA GUTIERREZ

native and Winston-Salem resident is also a trial lawyer and national speaker on stress management by trade, and a huntsman, a fisherman and gourmet cook at heart, who describes himself as "a cowboy, fiercely independent [who] needs to see what's on the other side of the hill."

It was this free-spirited curiosity that inspired Early to travel across our state as he visited more than 200 restaurants in quest of the best barbecue in North Carolina. He journeyed to all 100 counties and interviewed 1,500 people as he researched every aspect of this culinary tradition.

His expedition is documented in "The Best Tarheel Barbecue, Manteo to Murphy," a barbecue guidebook that relates the history and traditions of Carolina 'cue. Early takes readers along on a journey through highways and back roads, relating the personal stories of those he met along the way, of the people who raise the hogs, cook the barbecue, serve it and, ultimately, eat it. In his zeal to obtain information, Early talked to anyone who would answer his questions, from farmers to policemen to truck drivers and barbecue place owners. His goal was to write a book that guided the reader through the locations, recipes and cooking styles of the entire state.

Lowes Foods Stores Inc. is helping sponsor the project and is distributing the book in its 104 stores across the state. The books are also available at Borders Books in Cary and Quail Ridge Bookstore in Raleigh, as well as in most of the restaurants featured in the book. It retails for \$14.95.

"This was done as a labor of love for Jim Early, who drove more than 18,000 miles for the better part of a year to research the book. In addition to the travel and time to actually write the book, he had to continue to run his solo law practice. His energy is only equaled by the respect I have for him," wrote Clifton Barnes, editor of the book and a Cary resident

Barnes, a winner of more than 30 national journalism awards and former director of communications for the North Carolina Bar Association, knows Early well. They have worked on several projects together in the past. He described Early as a very trusting man who often volunteers his time to help fellow attorneys and the public at large.

"After the flooding in Eastern North Carolina a couple of years ago, he threw some things in his car and drove down to Tarboro and volunteered to help. He stayed for many days mostly helping the National Guard," Barnes wrote via e-mail.

"The Best Tarheel Barbecue, Manteo to Murphy" was born out of Early's passion for cook-

ing, which he inherited from his mother, Nettie Hicks Early, and her family. It was also a product of Early's desire to raise funds for a cause close to his heart. All of the proceeds from this book — about 40-45 percent of the total sales — will be donated to the Special Olympics of North Carolina. Early has personally spent more than \$60,000 to bring this book to fruition.

Early told Creative Cooking in a telephone interview that his commitment to this cause began years back, when he raised horses. He boarded his horses with a lady who also gave riding lessons to athletes from the Special Olympics. Those children became the source of Early's inspiration.

"For some of these young athletes, just merely sitting on the saddle was all they could accomplish and they did it with great determination and a great sense of pride. It touched my heart and caused me to want to do something for them," Early said.

He went on to say that at the time, he had been unable to help, due to the fact that he was still building his law practice and was funding his own children's education. However, he said that he knew that someday he would be able to help.

"[This] is my way of making the biggest gift that I personally could make to Special Olympics," he said.

The book captures the soul of barbecue. Early, who has tasted barbecue all over the world, from Africa to Canada, is quick to say that North Carolina has the "best barbecue in the world." He also documents three types of barbecue in our state, not just the two widely known in these parts. In addition to Eastern-style (which is whole hog with a vinegar-based sauce) and Lexington-style (shoulders with a vinegar-ketchup dip), there is another style west of Asheville that people around here are not familiar with.

"[It] is cooked mostly with indirect heat and is sold sliced and chopped and sauced with a sauce more akin to Kansas City or Chicago barbecue sauces," he said.

He devotes several paragraphs of his book to what he terms as the "war" between the different styles of barbecue and is quick to say that personal preferences on the different kinds of barbecue in our state run the gamut.

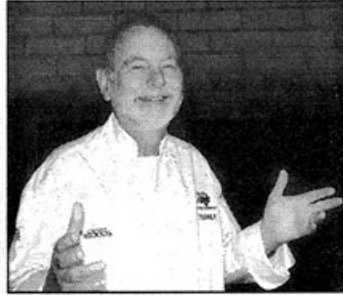
"Some of this Eastern-Lexington rivalry has been fostered by reporters because it makes good print and I think that's interesting. There is simply variety as far as taste about the state. But people — when talking about barbecue — seem to get excited about that. People are passionate about it [barbecue]. They have their likes and dislikes and it's very subjective," Early said.

He explained that barbecue changes slightly from one place to another, depending on how it is cooked; that there is good and "not so good" barbecue, but that he didn't think he could call any one "bad." He prefers barbecue that is cooked over wood coals, but says he has had very good ones cooked with electricity or gas. He also discovered that there are less than a dozen places east of Raleigh that still cook their barbecue over wood fire. He said that this is mostly

## MEET THE AUTHOR, BUY THE BOOK

Jim Early would love to raise a million dollars for the Special Olympics of North Carolina. Though that goal might be a stretch, more than 6,000 copies of "The Best Tar Heel Barbecue, Manteo to Murphy" — with proceeds benefitting the Special Olympics — have sold in the first six weeks of its release.

Early will be signing his book at the Lowes Foods Store in Preston Corners, 930 High House Road, on Friday, Nov. 15, 4 to 7 p.m.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Author Jim Early is something of an authority on North Carolina barbecue, having visited more than 200 barbecue restaurants in the state.

due to the fact that it takes more a year to train a pit master. In addition, wood is the hardest fuel to cook with, as it is susceptible to changes of temperature, humidity and types of wood.

"If someone doesn't know what they are doing, just cooking it over coals isn't going to make you a wonderful product. It's decidedly simpler and economically prudent to cook with electricity and gas. If it is fresh, prepared properly, if they have good sauce, it can be good anywhere in the state and I like it all," Early confessed.

Regardless of personal preferences, Early discovered that barbecue is a catalyst that brings people together, without prejudice of race or social status. His brief chapter on the history of barbecue is both enjoyable and enlightening, a must-read tale that equates the first pig pickin' back in 1584 to a keg party.

Early visited more than 200 restaurants, including those 140 in the book that met his criteria for good barbecue (those that scored 5 or above in a scale of 1-10). Those that didn't make it to print were bypassed because they were not cooking their own hogs, Early said, and because they were buying the meat frozen, heating and saucing it before serving it to customers.

He critiqued five to six places per day during his statewide search, sampling rather than

eating full meals. He would arrive hungry at each place, sample the barbecue in all the ways it was cooked — i.e., chopped, sauced or sliced — and would also taste one tablespoon of coleslaw and one hushpuppy. Like a wine critic, he would cleanse his palate with water between bites.

The barbecue was delicious, but what impressed Early the most were the people he met along the way. He called them his "new friends." He said that this experience allowed him to meet wonderful people and to listen to their stories. He called the farmers, pit masters, cooks, servers and customers the most genuine and unpretentious people he had ever met. He said that as soon as people discovered what he was writing about, they would begin to call him the endearing names saved for the locals, such as "honey" and "sugar."

"It enabled me to feel the warmth of friendship when they clasped my hand with both hands and asked me to come back and eat supper with them — to stay in touch," he said.

Of the many barbecue books written by North Carolina authors, this is one that best captures the heart of our state. It is set to become a collectible for those who love barbecue, a gift for 'cue neophytes as well as a culinary map for barbecue connoisseurs.

Early is the first to admit that he did not find all of the good barbecue places in the state and asks readers to send him their recommendations for a future book — he even provides a form at the end of the book readers can fill in and send him. He is busy writing his first cookbook (his barbecue book has recipes but is not a cookbook) for hunters and fishermen called "Shining Times — the Adventures and Recipes of a Sportsman," due to come out in 2003.

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## HERBED BISCUITS

2 c. self-rising flour  
1/4 c. minced fresh herbs  
1 to 1 1/2 c. heavy cream

Preheat the oven to 425 degrees F. In a bowl, combine the flour and the herbs, mixing well. Begin by adding one cup the cream and blending the biscuit dough with a wooden spoon until the mixture begins to leave the sides of the bowl (if you mix it by hand, turn the bowl 10 times, as you scoop and pat the dough together) — add a little bit more cream if mixture is too dry. Turn dough onto a well-floured surface and roll biscuits to 2 1/2-inch thickness. Cut out with large biscuit cutters, place around an ungreased round baking dish and brush tops of biscuits with remaining cream. Bake biscuits for 12-16 minutes or until they are lightly browned on top. Makes 6-8. — SANDRA GUTIERREZ

## JIM EARLY'S BANANA PUDDING

4 qts. half-n-half (milk)  
12 tbsp. (level) cornstarch  
1 1/4 c. white sugar  
16 eggs  
4 tsp. vanilla extract  
1 pinch salt  
6-7 fully ripe, firm bananas, sliced  
1 box Nabisco Nilla Wafers

Separate the whites and yolks of six eggs. Set the egg whites aside. In a large bowl, combine your dry ingredients, cornstarch, four cups sugar and salt together. In another bowl, whisk your 10 whole eggs and the yolks from six eggs until the mixture is well blended. Continuing to stir, pour in milk (half-n-half). Then continuing to stir add dry ingredients at point of stirring to prevent lumps. When your liquid is satin smooth pour into double boiler and cook, uncovered over hot almost boiling water stirring constantly. When your custard begins to thicken (approximately 20 minutes or when it will coat a wooden spoon) remove from heat and add vanilla extract. Set custard aside to cool some while you prepare your baking dish. Line bottom and sides of a 9x13 or larger baking dish with Nilla wafers; cover the bottom layer of Nilla wafers with sliced bananas. Pour a small amount of custard over your first layer of wafers and bananas and repeat until the dish is full with the top layer being custard. Do not fill to the top, but allow 1/3-inch for meringue. Whisk the remaining egg whites, stiff but not dry. Add meringue on top of pudding covering entire top to each edge. Bake in preheated oven (425 degrees) for five minutes or until light golden brown. Set pudding aside to cool for several hours and allow the Nilla wafers, bananas and custard to get to know one another. If the pudding is not to be eaten within 4-5 hours of completing, place toothpicks in the pudding to support aluminum foil, cover completely and refrigerate. When serving later the pudding does not have to be reheated but simply brought out and allowed to rest at room temperature for an hour or so before serving. Serves 12-15.

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