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## Disappearing Smoke: Why Black Pitmasters Are Being Left Behind by Commercialization within North Carolina Whole Hog Barbecue

Charlotte Lucas  
*William & Mary*

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**Disappearing Smoke: Why Black Pitmasters Are Being Left Behind By Commercialization  
within North Carolina Whole Hog Barbecue**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts / Science in Department from  
William & Mary**

**by**

**Charlotte Lucas**

Accepted for           *Honors*            
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

          *Adrienne Petty-Roberts*            
Professor Adrienne Petty-Roberts, Director

          *Jerry Watkins III*            
Professor Jerry Watkins III

          *Claire McKinney*            
Professor Claire McKinney

**Williamsburg, VA**

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## Introduction

From *Bon Appetit* to Netflix to the *New York Times*, barbecue has risen to a new cult status within the United States and garnered newfound attention and appreciation in the national media, especially with the prevalence of food-oriented networks since the early 1990s. Despite this new popularity, many barbecue establishments across the American South, specifically many belonging to legendary black pitmasters, have not benefited from this new status. This anomaly piqued my interest and made me want to explore how historical context has impacted the lack of inclusion of African American pitmasters in this movement. This thesis explores the history of North Carolina barbecue and the persistent patterns that might explain why black pitmasters are being left behind by this new trend of commercialization within Carolina barbecue. This topic is significant as it shows how centuries of discrimination within the cuisine of barbecue and within the American South have presented hurdles for black entrepreneurs and pitmasters.

When examining the arena of barbecue literature, it is often difficult to find historians or experts that specifically discuss North Carolina whole hog barbecue. However, in John Shelton Reed and Dale Volberg Reed's *Holy Smoke: The Big Book of North Carolina Barbecue* and Bob Garner's *Book of Barbecue: North Carolina's Favorite Food*, they both dive deep into the rich history surrounding the tradition of whole hog within the state. In Reed and Reed's work, they dive into the rich history of North Carolina barbecue from the colonial era to the late 2000s, how to cook it, and include recipes from many of the pitmasters they profile in their book.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, Garner pulls more from personal experience and discusses the history of North Carolina barbecue, but then moves into discussing his relationship with it as a media personality

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<sup>1</sup> Reed, Reed, and McKinney, *Holy Smoke*.

and provides restaurant reviews.<sup>2</sup> These two books provide excellent background regarding the history of North Carolina Eastern whole hog barbecue, but they were written in the late 2000s and early 2010s, which causes them to be unable to analyze the recent trend of commercialization occurring in American barbecue. These authors also, when briefly discussing the historical precedent of barbecue during the plantation era and its transition to sharecropping communities by Reed and Reed, fail to discuss the different experiences that black and white pitmasters have had with creating barbecue establishments in North Carolina.

Although not specifically an expert on Eastern North Carolina whole hog barbecue, it is impossible to discuss Southern barbecue and not discuss the scholarly contributions of Rien Fertel. In Fertel's *One True Barbecue: Fire, Smoke, and the Pitmasters Who Cook the Whole Hog*, he discusses the many pitmasters he visited and interviewed during his personal barbecue odyssey across the American South and Midwest.<sup>3</sup> Fertel does not focus on a specific type of barbecue or the history behind it, but he focuses on how pitmasters' individual experiences have shaped their business and how they came to barbecue.<sup>4</sup> Fertel's work is extremely helpful in discovering what roadblocks have faced black pitmasters and why many decided to open their own establishments and the weight behind those decisions. He describes how many black pitmasters across the country were able to successfully and unsuccessfully keep their businesses operational. However, he does not specifically address the struggles and roadblocks that black pitmasters within Eastern North Carolina whole hog barbecue have faced when entering the same industry that others across the country have had easier journeys. Additionally, his book also

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<sup>2</sup> Garner, *Bob Garner's Book of Barbecue*.

<sup>3</sup> Fertel, *One True Barbecue*.

<sup>4</sup> Fertel, *One True Barbecue*.

does not address the recent trends of commercialization within American barbecue in a similar fashion to Reed, Reed, and Garner as his book focuses on his personal barbecue journey.

In contrast to the previous authors, Adrian Miller, in his novel *Black Smoke: African American and the United States of Barbecue*, specifically discusses the experiences of black pitmasters with gaining recognition and success in American barbecue.<sup>5</sup> Miller's borderline personal discussion of his frustrations with the barbecue industry and historical text points to the historical exclusion of black pitmasters from media and competition barbecue, the struggles that black entrepreneurs faced opening restaurants, and where he believes that the future of black pitmasters in barbecue will be.<sup>6</sup> Miller discusses all types of barbecue, but specifically focuses on a few select pitmasters with only Ed Mitchell and his son being North Carolina barbecue's inclusion.<sup>7</sup> Miller specifically addresses the exclusion of black pitmasters from the media surrounding the recent trends of commercialization within whole hog barbecue and the historical background surrounding how this exclusion is not a new anomaly, but a continuation of centuries of patterns that pushed black pitmasters to the periphery of recognition within the barbecue industry. He also discusses many black owned businesses in the Midwest and other areas of the country that have been able to thrive in this new barbecue environment created by commercialization, such as the Jones' sisters of Jones Bar-B-Q in Kansas City, Missouri.<sup>8</sup> Despite this discussion of the exclusion of some black barbecue establishment owners from widespread media recognition, Miller fails to discuss why specifically black pitmasters in North Carolina whole hog are unable to capitalize off this trend themselves and instead are part of a dying art of cooking. Scholars studying barbecue and, specially, Eastern North Carolina whole

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<sup>5</sup> Miller, *Black Smoke*.

<sup>6</sup> Miller, *Black Smoke*.

<sup>7</sup> Miller, *Black Smoke*, 255.

<sup>8</sup> Miller, *Black Smoke*, 193.

hog fail to discuss why black pitmasters owning establishments is a dying occurrence in a time when barbecue is on the tip of everyone's tongue as one of the most sought-after styles of American cooking and a proud piece of North Carolina and Southern culture as a whole.

My original plan for my research was to conduct interviews with barbecue establishment owners and pitmasters who participate in whole hog competitions that center around the Eastern style of whole hog. However, I had a hard time connecting with pitmasters online, and these difficulties were compounded by the pandemic. For instance, I bought tickets to a whole hog competition and traveled to Raleigh, North Carolina to attend it only to find that the competition had been closed to the public and moved locations across the city because of COVID-19. I relied instead on interviews conducted by other oral historians, such as Rien Fertel and the Southern Foodways Alliance. I also conducted research within the online archives of the University of North Carolina, N.C. State, and Library of Congress in order to pull relevant newspaper interviews, slave narratives, and other archived interviews to help contextualize my project. I utilized resources from the Mordecai House Historical Site in Raleigh in order to get information and primary source references to their smokehouse on property, which is one of the oldest still standing within the state of North Carolina. In addition to traditional primary source documents, I scoured social media posts and announcements from barbecue societies, organizations, restaurants, and pitmasters themselves in order to provide up-to-date and relevant information with regards to the role of black pitmasters' establishments and their role within the arena of whole hog competition barbecue. Finally, I made use of illustrations and documents I collected from whole hog establishments, such as the Pit and Sam Jones BBQ, and from historical sites I have visited, such as the Mordecai House.

The thesis is organized into three main chapters that address the many factors that have

contributed to the exclusion of black pitmasters within the arena of whole hog barbecue. My first chapter provides background information surrounding the history of whole hog barbecue within the United States and its origins in African, Native American, and South American traditions. My second chapter discusses entrepreneurship and how many factors that have impacted black entrepreneurs have limited the enterprises of black pitmasters as well. I focus on the story of Rodney Scott and how he has broken the mold within South Carolina whole hog, but there is a lack of similar traction within the arena of North Carolina whole hog. The third chapter argues that media exposure and the biases that have existed within it over time have impacted the portrayal of black pitmasters within the barbecue industry and specifically whole hog. I analyze articles from *Southern Living* magazine and primary source documentation from social media sites and newspapers to show the various levels that media has impacted the portrayal of whole hog barbecue.



## Chapter 1: What is Whole Hog Barbecue?

What is the South without barbecue? It is almost impossible to discuss the rich culinary history of the American South without referencing the incredibly complex and important history that barbecue has had within the region. From Memphis style ribs to Texas brisket to Alabama white sauce, barbecue has such a rich history within the region and has become a symbol of many states' culinary and cultural histories. Each region has its own style of sauce and cooking techniques that are entrenched in the area's history and provide incredible cultural significance for many of these regions. In addition to the eventual evolution of barbecue into the more regional styles we know today, the arrival of barbecue to the land that would eventually become the United States owes its emergence to multiple cultural traditions, truly embodying our nation's reputation as a cultural melting pot.

Native Americans played a pivotal role in the introduction of barbecue to colonizers. The barbecue practices of Native Americans was first documented by a member of Hernando de Soto's men during his company's exploration of the land that would eventually become the state of Georgia.<sup>9</sup> In 1540, when describing a Native town, a member of De Soto's company named "The Gentleman of Elvas" wrote that "Maise is kept in a barbacoa, which is a house with wooden sides, like a room, raised aloft on four posts, and has a floor of cane."<sup>10</sup> In his description of the village, De Soto's man utilizes the Spanish word, barbacoa, for barbecue to describe the process being completed by the Natives in what appears to be the first iteration of what would become the smokehouse that we know today.

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<sup>9</sup> G. Dixon Hollingsworth, "The Story of Barbecue," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (1979): pp. 391-395, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40580545>, 391.

<sup>10</sup> Hollingsworth, "The Story of Barbecue", 391.

Riderugo Ranjel, another member of De Soto's expedition, further corroborated this narrative by describing the Spanish eating slow-cooked venison that had been roasted on a contraption made out of sticks.<sup>11</sup> In addition to what De Soto found in Georgia, Native Americans also were barbecuing further north in South Carolina. In 1701, during an expedition, explorer John Lawson wrote that "fire was surrounded with Roast Meat or Barbacues."<sup>12</sup> Lawson highlights the tradition of many South Carolina Native communities to dry and smoke meat for preservation and other reasons.<sup>13</sup> In North Carolina, Sir Walter Raleigh witnessed a group of Croatan Indians "broyling their fishe over the flame" in a manner that similarly mimicked a grill or early pit.<sup>14</sup> The numerous accounts of Native American traditions inspiring what would eventually become the American barbecue show their incredible role in creating the cuisine we know and love today, but they are not the group who had a large role in crafting the cuisine.

During the 1500s, the practice of smoking meat for consumption was not only popular among different Native tribes, but also within many tribes from the Caribbean. When the Spanish reached the islands of the Caribbean, they were greeted by the natives who had a contraption made out of sticks in the shape of a barbecue grill that went by the word *barbacòda*.<sup>15</sup> In describing Columbus' voyage, one of his men described how the Taino people utilized the technique of *barbacòda* to cook meat and fish that Columbus' men consumed upon their landing.<sup>16</sup> After learning of these traditions and utilizing their own background in cooking meat, Europeans

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<sup>11</sup> Hollingsworth, "The Story of Barbecue", 392.

<sup>12</sup> Hollingsworth, "The Story of Barbecue", 392.

<sup>13</sup> John Shelton Reed, Dale Volberg Reed, and William McKinney, *Holy Smoke: The Big Book of North Carolina Barbecue* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 13.

<sup>14</sup> Reed, Reed, and McKinney, *Holy Smoke*, 13.

<sup>15</sup> Reed, Reed, and McKinney, *Holy Smoke*, 12.

<sup>16</sup> Reed, Reed, and McKinney, *Holy Smoke*, 12.

and many of the enslaved Africans whom they had captured decided to improve upon the techniques of Native Americans and tribes of the Caribbean by creating their own smoking contraption and techniques.<sup>17</sup> In 1732, Richard Bradly described this new technique in the book *The Country Housewife* and how it was utilized to cook a whole hog. He wrote that one would “take a large Grid-iron, with two or three Ribs in it, and set it upon a stand of iron, about three Foot and a half high, and upon that, lay your Hog, . . . Belly-side downwards.”<sup>18</sup> Bradley describes a technique that would for centuries be utilized across the American South to cook whole hogs, but also was the root of what we now know today as Eastern North Carolina Whole Hog Barbecue.

### III. What Makes Eastern Whole Hog Barbecue Special?

What speaks more to being a Tar Heel than engaging in a friendly debate about what is the best style of barbecue, Piedmont or Eastern Carolina Whole Hog? As Jim Early of the North Carolina Barbecue Society once mentioned, “No other states fight within the state” about their barbecue.<sup>19</sup> North Carolina is home to two unique styles of barbecue, which have been the center of many controversies over the centuries. In *Holy Smoke: The Big Book of North Carolina Barbecue*, John Shelton Reed, Dale Volberg Reed, and William McKinney discuss the three parts of the definition of North Carolina Barbecue. First, “that it has been barbecued- that it has been cooked for a long time at a low temperature with heat and smoke from a fire of hardwood and/or hardwood coals.”<sup>20</sup> Second, the meat used is pork.<sup>21</sup> Finally, the meat is either basted or

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<sup>17</sup> Adrian Miller, *Black Smoke: African Americans and the United States of Barbecue* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 12.

<sup>18</sup> John Shelton Reed, “There’s a Word for It—The Origins of ‘Barbecue,’” *Southern Cultures* 13, no. 4 (2007): pp. 138-146, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26391738>, 142.

<sup>19</sup> Reed, Reed, and McKinney, *Holy Smoke*, 44.

<sup>20</sup> Reed, Reed, and McKinney, *Holy Smoke*, 8.

<sup>21</sup> Reed, Reed, and McKinney, *Holy Smoke*, 8.

served with a thin sauce that can only slightly vary from the main ingredients of vinegar, red pepper, and, in Western style, tomato.<sup>22</sup> However, these rules get even more specific when discussing the differences in what makes barbecue considered Eastern style North Carolina whole hog. The Eastern style is defined by its simple sauce consisting of vinegar and red peppers and the pork cut of choice not being a cut at all, but the whole hog cooked as one over the coals.<sup>23</sup> This differed from the Piedmont style, which uses pork shoulders and a more tomato-based sauce.<sup>24</sup>

Cooking a whole hog is a very labor-intensive process that requires a large amount of expertise. The process involves being able to carry and flip a 90- to 100-pound hog that often needs to be pre-brined.<sup>25</sup> This hog is then placed on chicken wire over a pit that needs to be tended to for hours and constantly resupplied with fresh coals from hardwood that is being burned in charcoal starters.<sup>26</sup> The meat is cooked low and slow and needs a constant, vigilant watch. Reed, Reed, and McKinney argue that there will be some enjoyable moments as “for the most part, cooking your own barbecue is peaceful and relaxing,” but that it will take twelve to fourteen hours to complete the cooking process.<sup>27</sup>

### III. The History of North Carolina Whole Hog Barbecue

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<sup>22</sup> Reed, Reed, and McKinney, *Holy Smoke*, 8.

<sup>23</sup> Reed, Reed, and McKinney, *Holy Smoke*, 43-44.

<sup>24</sup> Reed, Reed, and McKinney, *Holy Smoke*, 45.

<sup>25</sup> Reed, Reed, and McKinney, *Holy Smoke*, 101.

<sup>26</sup> Reed, Reed, and McKinney, *Holy Smoke*, 101.

<sup>27</sup> Reed, Reed, and McKinney, *Holy Smoke*, 100.



Smokehouse at the Mordecai Historic Park in Raleigh, NC (Courtesy of the Author)

North Carolina Eastern Whole Hog barbecue has been a defining point of North Carolina cuisine for centuries. After the introduction of the idea of the new pit-style of smoking hogs that arose out of the aforementioned influences of native and European practices, the practice of smoking hogs slowly became a mainstay within colonial culture, including North Carolina. One example is the smokehouse found on the grounds of the Mordecai Historic Park in Downtown Raleigh. The Mordecai House is the oldest house in Raleigh, NC in its original location and was once home to the largest plantation in Wake County.<sup>28</sup> Part of this complex was the smokehouse, which was built in 1826 and was extremely important for life on the plantation.<sup>29</sup> The smokehouse was utilized to smoke and store meat for the entire plantation, which made the job of smoking and preparing meat extremely important within the Plantation Era.

In *Plantation Sketches*, Margerety Devereux describes her life as a slave on the Mordecai plantation. When describing her life in Raleigh, she lists the “porkhouse” and

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<sup>28</sup> “Mordecai Historic Park Map and Pamphlet,” *Mordecai Historic Park Map and Pamphlet* (Raleigh, NC: Mordecai Historic Park, 2021).

<sup>29</sup> “Mordecai Historic Park Map and Pamphlet,” *Mordecai Historic Park Map and Pamphlet*.

“smokehouse” as important sights on the plantation.<sup>30</sup> In addition to highlighting the role that smoking hogs had within the mechanics of running the Mordecai Plantation, Devereux writes that during gatherings held by slaves on the plantation “holes [would] have been dug in the ground and heated for the barbecuing of various meats, and those who hold the honorable posts of cooks are busily engaged in basting, tasting, and sending the small urchins after fuel.”<sup>31</sup> The reverence in this description for those who are in charge of the meat or the pitmaster and the process of smoking shows the important role of pitmasters within slave communities during the Plantation Era. Devereux shows the rich history that whole hog has had in the lives of slaves on North Carolina plantations through their daily tasks for their masters as well as a form of celebration and a symbol of community.

The importance of black pitmasters in the lives and practices of Southern plantation life shifted after the end of slavery and into the 1900s with the introduction of sharecropping and the influence of segregation. During the 19th century, there were few non-black pitmasters within North Carolina as there were few white men with the skill or knowledge to cook whole hog whereas many black pitmasters had learned the trade from their experiences on plantations or from traditions that were passed down.<sup>32</sup> Barbecue needed a new transition beyond its static role as a part of the Plantation Era. This shift came in the form of whole hogs being served to laborers, such as those at North Carolina textile mills. It also became a mainstay at religious functions, political rallies, and community gatherings.<sup>33</sup> In a September 2, 1959 issue of the *Tabor City Tribune*, the paper advertised a Whole Hog Barbecue Festival at the Williams

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<sup>30</sup> Margaret Devereux, *The Project Gutenberg EBook of Plantation Sketches*, 1906, 22.

<sup>31</sup> Devereux, *The Project Gutenberg EBook of Plantation Sketches*, 75.

<sup>32</sup> Miller, *Black Smoke*, 109.

<sup>33</sup> Reed, Reed, and McKinney, *Holy Smoke*, 50-54.

Township school.<sup>34</sup> This article shows the shift occurring within the culture surrounding whole hog barbecue, which further cemented its place as a centerpiece of North Carolina's cultural identity.

Additionally, sharecropping and whole hog barbecue had close ties as North Carolina's tobacco culture involved many across the state to participate in the harvesting and curing process. As a reward for completing this task, many farmers would cook whole hogs in pits in the curing barns and would feed the many workers that participated in the harvest and curing.<sup>35</sup> This tradition led to many of the first barbecue restaurants in the state appearing in tobacco towns, such as Rocky Mount, Wilson, and Greensboro.<sup>36</sup> However, as there was popularity growing around whole hog barbecue as a community event, it also was starting to become a potential commercial enterprise.

#### IV. Black Pitmasters within North Carolina Barbecue

Throughout its history, the style has had a greater African American presence as opposed to the Piedmont style of barbecue. However, this trend was not entirely carried on when barbecue establishments started popping up across the state in the early 20th century. The majority of entrepreneurs who decided to enter the arena and open up their own whole-hog-based enterprises were white. Relatively few respected black pitmasters entered the field.<sup>37</sup> However, it was extremely common for a restaurant to be owned and operated by a white owner and the

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<sup>34</sup> "Williams Holding Barbecue," *Library of Congress*, accessed October 19, 2021, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn91068761/1959-09-02/ed-1/seq-1/#date1=1777&index=0&rows=20&words=Barbecue+Hog+Whole&searchType=basic&sequence=0&state=North+Carolina&date2=1963&proxtext=whole+hog+barbecue&y=24&x=21&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1>.

<sup>35</sup> Bob Garner, *Bob Garner's Book of Barbecue: North Carolina's Favorite Food* (Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair, 2012), 24.

<sup>36</sup> Garner, *Bob Garner's Book of Barbecue*, 26.

<sup>37</sup> Reed, Reed, and McKinney, *Holy Smoke*, 63.

actual pitmasters doing the labor being African American men.<sup>38</sup> This led to more white men entering into a field that had once been predominantly populated by black pitmasters, which led to increased commercial competition. This shift was also impacted by many white pitmasters learning or, in some cases, stealing from their black peers and then creating their own businesses. In *Black Smoke*, Adrian Miller discusses how many barbecue establishments in North Carolina and other states owe their success to the black pitmasters who worked for them. He states that “too many white barbecue restaurants owe a debt to an African American who trained cooks and permitted the use of his or her personal recipes.”<sup>39</sup> One such restaurateur was Bob Melton, a famous North Carolina Eastern whole hog pitmaster, who acknowledged that all his knowledge regarding barbecue came from an older black man whom he had worked alongside during his childhood.<sup>40</sup>

As white pitmasters were creating newer, nicer, and expanded barbecue enterprises, black pitmasters were steadily trying to enter the whole hog arena through their own restaurants and work as freelance barbecuers.<sup>41</sup> However, black pitmasters were often confined to home-based restaurants in segregated neighborhoods.<sup>42</sup> This practice often led to black entrepreneurs being unable to set up their restaurants in downtown areas and those that would have access to best foot traffic in order to attract customers. The limits of segregation laws on their success as Black businesses could only carry out their food from a restaurant's back door or side window.<sup>43</sup> At Scott's restaurant in Goldsboro, which was a black-owned establishment, they only offered

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<sup>38</sup> Miller, *Black Smoke*, 114.

<sup>39</sup> Miller, *Black Smoke*, 114.

<sup>40</sup> Miller, *Black Smoke*, 114.

<sup>41</sup> Miller, *Black Smoke*, 115.

<sup>42</sup> Miller, *Black Smoke*, 132.

<sup>43</sup> Miller, *Black Smoke*, 131.



seating to white customers until the 1940s when a dining room was built for black customers.<sup>44</sup> Many barbecue restaurants across the country were also victims of racially motivated violence as a result of their success. One famous example is Dreamland Barbecue in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, which was burnt down by the KKK.<sup>45</sup> After the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed, barbecue slowly, but surely also became integrated. The first restaurant in Durham to desegregate was a barbecue establishment in May 1963.<sup>46</sup>

When moving past the Civil Rights Era and the end of Jim Crow, black pitmasters started to experience new opportunities as a result of changing economic conditions, but also continued to be faced with the still commonplace racist biases. During the 1950s into the 1970s, many white barbecue businesses started transforming into chain restaurants.<sup>47</sup> However, a black-owned chain Eastern North Carolina barbecue restaurant never came to be. These chain restaurants were effective in pushing out many restaurants across the South and North Carolina with their ability to create consistent barbecue efficiently.<sup>48</sup> However, black barbecue establishments were still able to remain resilient and continue to thrive during this era as they were extremely popular eating spots and parts of the community for many black North Carolinians.<sup>49</sup>

Throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, black pitmasters continued trying to keep their existing business afloat, while others faced struggles in starting their own. When starting their business many of the entrepreneurs faced increased scrutiny as “many do not have the resources, in terms of time, money, and adequate representation to deal with the constant inspections, or to

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<sup>44</sup> Reed, Reed, and McKinney, *Holy Smoke*, 64.

<sup>45</sup> Southern Foodways, *Full Circle: The Ballad of Rodney And Roscoe*.

<sup>46</sup> Reed, Reed, and McKinney, *Holy Smoke*, 64.

<sup>47</sup> Miller, *Black Smoke*, 143.

<sup>48</sup> Miller, *Black Smoke*, 144.

<sup>49</sup> Miller, *Black Smoke*, 144.

fight the and resolve disputes about fines.”<sup>50</sup> There was also the added struggle that historically and through the 2000s and 2010s, black restaurateurs have a lack of access to loans and other types of financial resources. Minority entrepreneurs are statistically less likely to be approved for small business loans than white business owners, and they face higher interest rates and often are awarded smaller loans.<sup>51</sup> This led black pitmasters to rely on their own personal wealth or try to garner wealth from their personal contacts, such as family, friends, and community members.<sup>52</sup> However, many black barbecue businesses were able to take off and survive during this era. As Miller writes in his book *Black Smoke*, “black barbecue businesses are such a success story that they are the standard for Black entrepreneurship ... even to the point of derision.”<sup>53</sup>

Despite this prosperity of many black barbecue restaurants across the country continuing into the 2010s and early 2020s, this phenomenon seems to have skipped many pitmasters cooking Eastern North Carolina whole hog barbecue despite there being increased national attention on their style of barbecue and the cuisine in general. Whole hog barbecue and the labor and craft involved with the cooking style hit the national stage with the arrival of Rodney Scott. In 2018 Rodney Scott, a pitmaster who cooks whole hog barbecue in Hemmingway, South Carolina, was awarded the James Beard Award for Best Chef: Southeast.<sup>54</sup> This event drew the attention of many to the hard work of pitmasters and the need to recognize whole hog barbecue on the same level as other more revered cuisines. From this moment of success, Scott has been able to launch a successful number of Rodney Scott’s BBQ restaurants across numerous

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<sup>50</sup> Miller, *Black Smoke*, 140.

<sup>51</sup> Miller, *Black Smoke*, 140.

<sup>52</sup> Miller, *Black Smoke*, 140.

<sup>53</sup> Miller, *Black Smoke*, 140.

<sup>54</sup> *Chef's Table: BBQ*, *Chef's Table BBQ* (Netflix, 2020).

<https://www.netflix.com/watch/81292974?trackId=13752289&tctx=0%2C0%2C12e185a1d0397d10ce0ce8b5b358b1fb535d2d5c%3A41c425c08138cd050ba65a051f58e52f6030a738%2C12e185a1d0397d10ce0ce8b5b358b1fb535d2d5c%3A41c425c08138cd050ba65a051f58e52f6030a738%2Cunknown%2C> .

Southern metropolitan areas and released his own cookbook highlighting whole hog barbecue.<sup>55</sup>

Scott's increasing popularity and prolonged success and media exposure has allowed him to draw significant attention to the cuisine of whole hog barbecue and the struggles that many black pitmasters face.

#### V. Where is Whole Hog Today?

Whole hog barbecue had already been increasing its presence in the American public consciousness prior to Scott's emergence. In *Book of Barbecue: North Carolina's Favorite Food*, Bob Garner discusses his appearance on ABC's *Good Morning America* and the exposure he tried to bring to whole hog barbecue and North Carolina barbecue in general.<sup>56</sup> He additionally also recounts his visit to Savannah to be featured on Paula Deen's former show, *Paula's Home Cooking* in order to promote the cuisine.<sup>57</sup> These media appearances were not the only exposure that Whole Hog had experienced. In Rien Fertel's 2016 book *The One True Barbecue: Fire, Smoke, and the Pitmasters Who Cook the Whole Hog*, he brings attention to the skill and lack of whole hog pitmasters that are left across the United States. Fertel helped bring the public's attention to the need to save whole hog barbecue as he noticed that people were switching from cooking whole hog to other styles of barbecue.<sup>58</sup> Fertel's efforts were coupled with the attention that newspapers also brought to the Carolinas.

In a *Washington Post* article from 2015 titled "Why North Carolina's barbecue scene is still smoldering," Jim Shahin writes about the decreasing number of restaurants cooking whole hogs over wood in the traditional style. He highlights numerous famous barbecue establishments

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<sup>55</sup> Netflix, *Chef's Table: BBQ*.

<sup>56</sup> Garner, *Bob Garner's Book of Barbecue*, 62.

<sup>57</sup> Garner, *Bob Garner's Book of Barbecue*, 80.

<sup>58</sup> Rien Fertel, *One True Barbecue: Fire, Smoke, and the Pitmasters Who Cook the Whole Hog* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 4.

who cook the Eastern style of whole hog, such as Grady’s barbecue, a black-owned establishment, and Wilber’s Barbecue in Goldsboro, NC.<sup>59</sup> Shahin brought the public’s attention to the struggles facing pitmasters across North Carolina within the Eastern whole hog cuisine, but this increased media coverage and attention from the American public did allow for some whole hog establishments to capitalize on the opportunity and try to improve or even expand their businesses.



Barbecue Plate at the Pit in Raleigh, NC (Courtesy of the Author)

One such fabled restaurant is the Pit in downtown Raleigh, which is owned by Greh Hatem and the Empire eats restaurant group.<sup>60</sup> The Pit, which Bob Garner, famous TV personality and pitmaster, bills as the “the most unusual barbecue restaurant in terms of style and ambience,” combines barbecue with a young, urban vibe.<sup>61</sup> As shown in the above image, the Pit

<sup>59</sup> Jim Shahin, “Why North Carolina’s Barbecue Scene Is Still Smoldering,” *The Washington Post* (WP Company, September 21, 2015), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/food/why-north-carolinas-barbecue-scene-is-still-smoldering/2015/09/20/019564f6-5c9d-11e5-8e9e-dce8a2a2a679\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/food/why-north-carolinas-barbecue-scene-is-still-smoldering/2015/09/20/019564f6-5c9d-11e5-8e9e-dce8a2a2a679_story.html).

<sup>60</sup> “Pit Family | the Pit in Raleigh, NC - Thepit-Raleigh.com,” accessed April 12, 2022, <https://www.thepit-raleigh.com/pit-family/>.

<sup>61</sup> Garner, *Bob Garner's Book of Barbecue*, 186.

allows diners to eat traditional chopped whole hog barbecue alongside more urban options, such as blackened salmon, BBQ soy nuggets, and shrimp skewers.<sup>62</sup> The restaurant serves traditional whole hog barbecue with cocktails and a history lesson about the pork on the back of every menu.<sup>63</sup> The Pit, which has existed since 2008, originally brought on Ed Mitchell, famed black North Carolina whole hog pitmaster, to help their barbecue program, but he quickly left the project.<sup>64</sup> The Pit capitalized on this new wave of interest in barbecue throughout the 2010s by targeting younger markets who were more inclined to eat their barbecue with a drink in the downtown as opposed to the classic whole hog restaurants that had been around for decades. They have also been incredibly friendly with the media. On their website, they state that they have “won a rib challenge on Food Network's *Throwdown with Bobby Flay* and competed on *Chopped*. ... been on The Travel Channel's *Man v. Food* and was included in a barbecue cook-off on NBC's *The Today Show*.<sup>65</sup> They also have been on numerous “cooking segments on ABC's "Good Morning, America" and "The Morning Show" on CBS, and ... in *Bon Appetit*, *Southern Living*, *Men's Health*, *GQ*, *Imbibe*, *Delta Sky* and *Food Network* magazines.”<sup>66</sup> The Pit has been able to capitalize on the increased exposure and commercial approach that has been affecting the whole hog barbecue industry for the last few years and have been incredibly successful in their strategy.

Another example of this capitalization is from the famous Jones's family, who are the proud owners of Skylight Inn, which is one of the most famous and oldest whole hog restaurants in Eastern North Carolina. The Jones' family have been proud owners of Skylight Inn restaurant

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<sup>62</sup> “Menus: The Pit in Raleigh, NC,” The Pit | Authentic Barbecue Restaurant in Raleigh, NC, accessed April 13, 2022, <https://www.thepit-raleigh.com/menus/#dinner>.

<sup>63</sup> Garner, *Bob Garner's Book of Barbecue*, 186.

<sup>64</sup> Reed, Reed, and McKinney, *Holy Smoke*, 222.

<sup>65</sup> “Our Story | the Pit Raleigh in Raleigh, NC,” accessed April 12, 2022, <https://www.thepit-raleigh.com/pit-family> .

<sup>66</sup> “Our Story | the Pit Raleigh”, <https://www.thepit-raleigh.com/pit-family/> .

in Ayden, North Carolina since 1947.<sup>67</sup> In 1979, the restaurant was named “the barbecue capital of the world” by *National Geographic* magazine.<sup>68</sup> However, with the new interest in whole hog barbecue by the American public and across the South, there was money to be made. Sam Jones, the youngest of the Jones clan, knew exactly what he needed to do.

In 2015, Sam Jones opened the first Sam Jones BBQ location in Winterville, North Carolina, outside of Greensboro.<sup>69</sup> Jones utilized the same family recipes, such as their famous cornbread and coleslaw, and style of whole hog barbecue cooking as Skylight Inn in Ayden, but he moved the restaurant to a much more urban location.<sup>70</sup> In addition, he plans on expanding the menu, as “he’ll also serve pork ribs, a variety of sides, perhaps beer — and maybe even a burger.”<sup>71</sup> This expansion is one that goes against the Jones’ tradition at Skylight Inn, which as Sam Jones states “we got barbecue, slaw, and cornbread. That’s it.”<sup>72</sup> In 2021, Jones then opened a second location of Sam Jones BBQ in the middle of downtown Raleigh.<sup>73</sup> Jones himself even acknowledges that his restaurant is an attempt to try to reach newer demographics and try to outlast the almost extinction plaguing black pitmasters. He states that “a lot of old restaurants are going out of business every day, and they don’t realize it: You have to stay relevant.”<sup>74</sup> Sam Jones was able to expand his family’s business and capitalize on the increased attention being given to whole hog barbecue by those within the American South and across the nation.

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<sup>67</sup> Reed, Reed, and McKinney, *Holy Smoke*, 202.

<sup>68</sup> Reed, Reed, and McKinney, *Holy Smoke*, 202.

<sup>69</sup> Elizabeth Lincicome, “Third Generation Pitmaster ‘Spreads the Gospel of N.C. Barbecue,’” *The North State Journal*, June 17, 2021, <https://nsjonline.com/article/2021/06/third-generation-pitmaster-spreads-the-gospel-of-n-c-barbecue/>.

<sup>70</sup> “Sam Jones BBQ Restaurant: Greenville, Raleigh & Wilmington, NC,” Sam Jones BBQ, accessed April 12, 2022, <https://www.samjonesbbq.com/>.

<sup>71</sup> Shahin, “Why North Carolina’s Barbecue Scene Is Still Smoldering”.

<sup>72</sup> Reed, Reed, and McKinney, *Holy Smoke*, 208.

<sup>73</sup> Sean Lennard and Kathy Hanrahan, “Foodie News: Sam Jones BBQ Opens in Raleigh: Out and about at Wral.com,” WRAL.com (WRAL, January 29, 2021), <https://www.wral.com/foodie-news-sam-jones-bbq-opens-in-raleigh/19498950/>.

<sup>74</sup> Shahin, “Why North Carolina’s Barbecue Scene Is Still Smoldering”.

Despite Sam Jones and the Pit's success, black pitmasters have been unable to reach the same level of success with the recent trend of commercialization and popularity within the arena of whole hog barbecue. As of April 2021, the only one black owned whole hog barbecue restaurant exists in the entire state of North Carolina.<sup>75</sup> Grady's Barbecue in Dudley, NC, despite Steve and Gerri Grady's ages of 86 and 76 and the pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic have managed to keep their restaurant alive unlike many other black pitmasters who have either fallen victim to age or the economic downfall of the pandemic and other economic factors.<sup>76</sup> Famed pitmaster Ed Mitchell's son Ryan hopes to add to this number by opening a restaurant called The Preserve in Raleigh with his father in 2022, but that will bring up the state's number of whole hog barbecue establishments owned by black pitmasters to just two.<sup>77</sup>

In recent years, many black-owned whole hog establishments in North Carolina have been experiencing closure. One famous example is Jack Cobb & Son, which was owned by Rudy Cobb and had been open since the 1940s.<sup>78</sup> The restaurant, which was a part of the famous North Carolina Barbecue Society's Historic Barbecue Trail, sadly closed its doors in 2018 as a result of Cobb retiring and trying to sell the restaurant.<sup>79</sup> Cobb's story is one that is not uncommon across the state with many black pitmasters and their establishments going out of business or closing as a result of their owners retiring. As pitmasters are getting older, there are few that want to put in

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<sup>75</sup> "Grady's BBQ: How North Carolina's Only Black-Owned Whole Hog Barbecue Joint Survived the COVID-19 Pandemic," ABC11 Raleigh-Durham (WTVD-TV, April 24, 2021), <https://abc11.com/business/how-one-iconic-nc-bbq-joint-survived-the-covid-pandemic/10543450/?fbclid=IwAR3BdjDj3O8if9RMqDlmI9aZbV4V5S7XtSxeNMyuG4gknE-Rnwz24OAYaX4>.

<sup>76</sup> ABC11 Raleigh-Durham, "Grady's BBQ".

<sup>77</sup> Daliah Singer, "The Overlooked Contributions of Black Americans to U.S. Barbecue Culture," *Condé Nast Traveler*, June 29, 2021, <https://www.cntraveler.com/story/the-overlooked-contributions-of-black-americans-to-us-barbecue-culture>.

<sup>78</sup> Southern Foodways Alliance, *Southern Foodways Alliance*, 2011, <https://www.southernfoodways.org/interview/jack-cobb-and-son-barbecue-place/>.

<sup>79</sup> Nikki Crosthwaite, "Jack Cobb and Son Barbecue Place to Close in October," WNCT (WNCT, August 8, 2018), <https://www.wnct.com/news/jack-cobb-and-son-barbecue-place-to-close-in-october/>.

the long hours to take over the business or have the economic means to do so if they are not receiving it as inheritance from a family member.

#### IV. How did Exclusion Happen?

How did this happen during this age of commercialization and popularity within the North Carolina Eastern Whole Hog community? Why is it disproportionately impacting black pitmasters? These questions are impossible to answer without looking to the past historical precedent surrounding the many experiences of African Americans in North Carolina and, specifically, the historical problems that black pitmasters faced in starting and maintaining their business over the centuries. Historical context has set up many of the dire situations that black pitmasters who are trying to enter into the scene are facing and those that families and pitmasters who have been in the industry for decades are struggling to cope with or have admitted defeat to. There is a two-fold answer to these questions, and they rest in the struggles that have historically faced black entrepreneurs, and the lacking quantity and quality of media exposure that black pitmasters who cook Eastern North Carolina whole hog barbecue have experienced over the past decades.

After the end of the barbecue restaurant boom in the 1940s, many black pitmasters faced struggles to start their own barbecue businesses as a result of a lack of access to capital. This problem created a lack of family businesses owned by black pitmasters that were able to get off the ground running and survive over numerous decades. With the rising prices facing pitmasters, such as the price of whole hogs and wood, this is exacerbating an issue that black pitmasters already were trying to combat. However, for the few that did, they faced their own struggles as entrepreneurs. With a shift in American culture, less and less children of pitmasters are deciding to enter into their family business and learn the trade as they are seeking jobs with larger salaries



and a hope for more prestige. This is causing many restaurants to face closing or being forced to close upon their owner's retirement or death. The economic conditions that black entrepreneurs have faced for centuries have had lasting effects on the black pitmasters within the field of Eastern North Carolina Whole Hog barbecue.

In addition to the historical context of black entrepreneurship, the media has played an incredibly large role in how black pitmasters in the realm of the whole hog can engage with the trend of commercialization and the cuisines' new popularity. Media in the past has disproportionately focused on the efforts and contributions of white pitmasters to the world of Eastern North Carolina whole hog barbecue and has failed to show the true impact and prevalence that black pitmasters have had within the industry. This prolonged lack of media exposure of black owned establishments through the decades, and continued failure to equitably show the importance of black pitmasters in comparison to white whole hog pitmasters within the cuisine has greatly caused a negative impact.

The exploration of the inadequate quantity and quality of media coverage of black pitmasters over the decades and the impact of the history of black entrepreneurship throughout the American South and in North Carolina in particular will expose the reasoning behind the lack of inclusion of black pitmasters within the recent trend of commercialization within Eastern North Carolina whole hog barbecue. Black pitmasters have been disproportionately excluded from a variety of different media outlets over the centuries prior and after our nation's founding from newspapers to magazines to television. Newspapers advertised whole hog barbecue as community events while ignoring the many black pitmasters behind its creation. Magazines often failed to include any or extremely few black, whole hog pitmasters on their lists of recommended spots and best pitmasters in the country lists. Television failed to reach out, showcase, or include

black pitmasters in numerous cooking segments from the early days on national morning shows to the travel and cooking shows of the Food Network. Whole hog pitmasters have been ignored by mainstream media in general over the centuries, but black pitmasters were especially excluded when examining the first instances of pitmaster recognition in the 1970s and in more recent media surrounding the cuisine. As a result of their exclusion from media and the struggles they have faced as black entrepreneurs, black pitmasters have been excluded from the recent trend of commercialization within whole hog barbecue.

## Chapter 2: Black Entrepreneurship within Whole Hog Barbecue

Being a restaurateur centers around being an excellent cook or having access to one, but it also involves being a successful entrepreneur. Through the decades, the culture of the American South has put pressure on the businesses of black entrepreneurs through a variety of different mechanisms. From the KKK's violence to familial tensions and a lack of access to capital, black entrepreneurs have faced many threats to their businesses. This struggle partly explains part of why black pitmasters have been excluded from the recent trend of commercialization within whole hog barbecue. Pitmasters who decide to enter the arena of owning an establishment take on the responsibility of not just being a barbecue chef, but also having to assume the added responsibilities and risks of being an entrepreneur.

One of the most famous examples of the success that black pitmasters can achieve in whole hog barbecue is the amazing story of Rodney Scott, the owner of numerous successful whole hog barbecue restaurants across the South. However, Scott is from South Carolina and cooks South Carolina style whole hog barbecue, and there has been a failure within the arena of North Carolina whole hog barbecue to have a black pitmaster reach the same level of celebrity and success despite facing many of the same initial roadblocks as black entrepreneurs. This chapter will examine the variety of reasons for this anomaly. It will analyze the factors that impact black pitmasters across the nation like access to capital and the struggles of maintaining a family business. In addition, it will also touch upon the factors that specifically are impacting this trend within whole hog barbecue as a cuisine, which includes the rising price of cooking whole hog specifically and a lack of interest in pursuing the style of barbecue preparation as opposed to those that are less taxing economically and physically. Whole hog barbecue

establishments are not just places to grab a meal, but also a symbol of black entrepreneurship within the American South.

### I. Rodney Scott

It is impossible to discuss the concept of entrepreneurship within barbecue without mentioning Rodney Scott. Scott grew up in the town of Hemmingway, South Carolina, which he describes as “about an hour west of Myrtle Beach, two hours north of Charleston, a little small rural town, mostly known for farming back in the day.”<sup>80</sup> Scott was not just born into a region that loved cooking barbecue, but he was born into a barbecue family. The Scott family owned their own barbecue restaurant, Scott’s Bar-B-Que, in Hemmingway where Rodney learned how to smoke hogs. He described the intense role that barbecue had in his childhood by stating “I was about 11 years old, and my dad gave me the opportunity to go to a basketball game that night. And the choice was, you have to cook the hog, or you don't go to this game.”<sup>81</sup> After he graduated high school, Scott was pushed to join his family’s business and abandon his dreams of other possible careers.<sup>82</sup> Despite his initial reluctance, Scott was able to transform his family business beyond their wildest dreams.

This rise to fame started in 2009 when John T. Edge, a famous barbecue expert and *New York Times* columnist, did a feature on the Scotts’ establishment.<sup>83</sup> The article “ran on Wednesday, June 10, when Scott’s was closed [as] they only cooked on Thursday, Friday, and

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<sup>80</sup> Scott, Rodney. Interview with Rien Fertel. June 21, 2012. <https://www.southernfoodways.org/interview/scotts-bar-b-que/>, 7.

<sup>81</sup> Scott, Rodney. Interview with Steve Inskeep. March 29, 2021. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2021/03/29/982184874/rodney-scott-wants-to-take-over-the-world-with-barbecue>.

<sup>82</sup> *Chef's Table: BBQ*, *Chef's Table BBQ* (Netflix, 2020), <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81292974?trackId=13752289&tctx=0%2C0%2C12e185a1d0397d10ce0ce8b5b358b1fb535d2d5c%3A41c425c08138cd050ba65a051f58e52f6030a738%2C12e185a1d0397d10ce0ce8b5b358b1fb535d2d5c%3A41c425c08138cd050ba65a051f58e52f6030a738%2Cunknown%2C>.

<sup>83</sup> “We Are One,” Southern Foodways Alliance, June 19, 2019, <https://www.southernfoodways.org/we-are-one/>.

Saturday back then,” but when “the restaurant opened for its usual hours that week, sales jumped at least 20% and maybe more.”<sup>84</sup> Despite this success, the Scotts experienced tragedy on November 27, 2013 when a grease fire destroyed the building that housed their pits.<sup>85</sup> As a result of this tragedy, Scott decided to pursue a tour around the country called Rodney Scott in Exile in order “to raise at least \$100,000, part of which will be used to help the Scotts rebuild, this time with metal materials so they can insure the barbecue pits.”<sup>86</sup> Through this tour, Scott was able to expose people to the process and style of whole hog barbecue. He also was able to secure an investor to open a new restaurant, in addition to his family’s establishment, in Charleston, South Carolina.<sup>87</sup>

After the opening of his Charleston restaurant, everything changed for Scott. In 2018, Scott was nominated for the James Beard Foundation Award for Best Chef Southeast and went on to win the award in May of that same year.<sup>88</sup> From his James Beard win, Scott had expanded his business. As of April 2022, Rodney Scott’s Whole Hog Barbecue has three locations across the South including a recently opened one in Homewood, Alabama.<sup>89</sup> When talking about his increasing success, Scott is careful of how precarious his situation is as a black pitmaster in a whole hog barbecue. He states in the documentary *Full Circle: the Ballad of Rodney and Roscoe* that he would never allow for his business to become franchises as he would lose the ability to control the quality of his diners' experience, and that motto for his business is “don’t change the

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<sup>84</sup> Southern Foodways Alliance, “We Are One”.

<sup>85</sup> Christopher McKagen, ed., “Scott’s BBQ Smokehouse in Hemingway Burned in Early Wednesday Fire,” SCNow, November 27, 2013, [https://scnow.com/observer/news/scott-s-bbq-smokehouse-in-hemingway-burned-in-early-wednesday-fire/article\\_c0dd7b7a-5793-11e3-8c64-0019bb30f31a.html](https://scnow.com/observer/news/scott-s-bbq-smokehouse-in-hemingway-burned-in-early-wednesday-fire/article_c0dd7b7a-5793-11e3-8c64-0019bb30f31a.html).

<sup>86</sup> Debbie Elliott, “When His Pit Burned Down, Southern BBQ Master Took Hogs On Tour,” NPR (NPR, February 4, 2014), <https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2014/02/04/271526910/when-his-pit-burned-down-a-southern-bbq-master-took-hogs-on-tour>.

<sup>87</sup> Netflix, *Chef’s Table: BBQ*.

<sup>88</sup> Southern Foodways Alliance, “We Are One”.

<sup>89</sup> “Locations- Rodney Scott’s BBQ,” Rodney Scott’s BBQ, accessed December 7, 2021, <https://www.rodneyscottsbbq.com/locations/>.

music. Don't change the recipes. And three, don't fire my wife."<sup>90</sup> Scott understands that he could have allowed his success to take over his business and lose his power as a black entrepreneur to white investors and others trying to make money off his success. However, he understands the scrutiny he is under from both the culinary community and from those around him, such as family and members of the Hemmingway community.<sup>91</sup> In order to try to reason with this complex line, Scott tries to open his restaurants in primarily African American communities to use his success to reinvest in these communities and to help others achieve economic independence and potentially become black entrepreneurs on their own.<sup>92</sup> Through these initiatives, Scott has been able to create a successful, multilocation barbecue empire, but by his own rules.

Rodney Scott is aware of his meteoric rise to fame and the symbolism that it has had within the culinary and barbecue communities. In *Full Circle: the Ballad of Rodney and Roscoe*, Scott and Roscoe Hall II, one of the members of Rodney Scott's staff at his Tuscaloosa location and the grandson of John C. Bishop, who founded the famous Dreamland Barbecue, discusses the lack of black entrepreneurs for those in barbecue.<sup>93</sup> Rodney Scott was able to rise up in a cuisine that is often associated with being extremely casual and not culinarily respected, yet establish himself as a pitmaster and chef in the same league as fine dining restaurants, as exemplified by his winning of a James Beard Award for Award for Best Chef Southeast, while also creating a thriving and successful business.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> *Full Circle: The Ballad of Rodney And Roscoe*, accessed April 21, 2021, <https://www.southernfoodways.org/film/full-circle-the-ballad-of-rodney-and-roscoe/>.

<sup>91</sup> Southern Foodways, *Full Circle: The Ballad of Rodney And Roscoe*.

<sup>92</sup> Southern Foodways, *Full Circle: The Ballad of Rodney And Roscoe*.

<sup>93</sup> Southern Foodways, *Full Circle: The Ballad of Rodney And Roscoe*.

<sup>94</sup> Netflix, *Chef's Table: BBQ*.

Scott represents the recent trend of commercialization and discussion surrounding barbecue in the United States and can do so in the demanding style of whole hog barbecue. However, he is alone in achieving this level of success within the realm of South Carolina style whole hog barbecue. However, what about those within Eastern North Carolina barbecue? Have black pitmasters been able to establish themselves as entrepreneurs at the same level as Scott? After the stress and economic downturn of the COVID-19 pandemic ravaged American society, it also impacted the Eastern North Carolina barbecue community. As of April 24, 2021, only Grady's BBQ survived the pandemic and stands as the only black owned whole hog barbecue establishment in North Carolina.<sup>95</sup> In contrast, Rodney Scott's Whole Hog barbecue was able to continue to thrive with all three existing locations, Charleston, South Carolina, Birmingham, Alabama, and Atlanta, Georgia, still in operation and even opening a new location in Homewood, Alabama.<sup>96</sup> Why is North Carolina specifically experiencing this downturn in black owned whole hog establishments? We will explore the numerous reasons why this might be occurring within the context of the Rodney Scott-led commercialization of whole hog barbecue and how North Carolina Eastern style specifically is experiencing this anomaly with black entrepreneurs within the sphere of whole hog.

## II. Family Business

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<sup>95</sup> "Grady's BBQ: How North Carolina's Only Black-Owned Whole Hog Barbecue Joint Survived the COVID-19 Pandemic," ABC11 Raleigh-Durham (WTVD-TV, April 24, 2021), <https://abc11.com/business/how-one-iconic-nc-bbq-joint-survived-the-covid-pandemic/10543450/?fbclid=IwAR3BdjDj3O8if9RMqDlmI9aZbV4V5S7XtSxeNMMyuG4gknE-Rnwz24OAYaX4>.

<sup>96</sup> Rodney Scotts BBQ, "Locations- Rodney Scotts BBQ".



Whole Hog Barbecue Plate from Sam Jones BBQ Restaurant in Raleigh, NC (Courtesy of the Author)

Family businesses are hallmarks within the world of barbecue and particularly within the realm of whole hog barbecue. Many of the most famous eastern North Carolina whole hog establishments are decades old businesses handed down among white families. One of the most famous examples is Skylight Inn BBQ in Ayden, North Carolina and one of their newer offshoots, Sam Jones Whole Hog Barbecue in Greenville and Raleigh, North Carolina. Started in 1947 by Pete Jones, Skylight Inn has been cooking whole hog barbecue under the ownership of the Jones family for over 74 years.<sup>97</sup> In the 1970s, they were declared by *National Geographic* to be the “the Bar-B-Q Capital of the World.”<sup>98</sup> From there, the Skylight Inn drew in a steady stream of customers over the years from around the nation and, under Pete Jones’ grandson Sam

<sup>97</sup> Rien Fertel, *One True Barbecue: Fire, Smoke, and the Pitmasters Who Cook the Whole Hog* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 38.

<sup>98</sup> Fertel, *One True Barbecue*, 39.



Jones, has expanded beyond the boundaries of their home of Ayden and entered into more urban areas as a result of the commercialization within the whole hog industry.<sup>99</sup> Sam Jones opened Sam Jones BBQ in Greenville, NC in 2015,<sup>100</sup> and a newer Raleigh location in 2021.<sup>101</sup> The locations pay homage to his family's famous barbecue joint by serving Skylight Inn's famous cornbread, vinegar sauce, smoked whole hog, and coleslaw, as pictured in the above image, alongside some more urban audience friendly choices, such as collard greens, french fries, barbecue salads, burgers, and even local beer served on a personalized sheet of butcher paper.<sup>102</sup>

The success of Skylight Inn and Sam Jones rests on the back of generations of knowledge and dedication to working within the barbecue industry and their ability to cash in further on the recent trend of commercialization within whole hog barbecue. However, their success also rests on the backs of many black pitmasters who worked with them along the way. As discussed by Dr. Howard Conyers, a NASA scientist and historian who has been collecting oral histories regarding black pitmasters across the nation, black pitmasters were often driving forces behind the success of family businesses like the Skylight Inn. Conyers specifically calls out Sam Jones and his family by stating "I would love to one day ask people like ... Sam Jones, "Who was cooking with your grandfather on that farm? Whose hands were working the pit in that cookhouse? You never talk about those people."<sup>103</sup> Many black pitmasters worked in white family businesses as opposed to starting their own for a variety of reasons, such as a lack of

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<sup>99</sup> John Shelton Reed, Dale Volberg Reed, and William McKinney, *Holy Smoke: The Big Book of North Carolina Barbecue* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 203.

<sup>100</sup> Erika Wells, "Finally! Sam Jones BBQ Opens in Raleigh," *Bizjournals.com*, 2021, <https://www.bizjournals.com/triangle/news/2021/02/11/sam-jones-barbeceu-opens-in-raleigh.html>.

<sup>101</sup> Sean Lennard and Kathy Hanrahan, "Foodie News: Sam Jones BBQ Opens in Raleigh :: Out and about at Wral.com," *WRAL.com* (WRAL, January 29, 2021), <https://www.wral.com/foodie-news-sam-jones-bbq-opens-in-raleigh/19498950/>.

<sup>102</sup> "Sam Jones BBQ Restaurant: Greenville, Raleigh & Wilmington, NC," Sam Jones BBQ, accessed April 12, 2022, <https://www.samjonesbbq.com/>.

<sup>103</sup> Howard Conyers and Hilary Cadigan, "This Rocket Scientist Is Tracing Black Ingenuity through Barbecue," *Bon Appétit*, June 16, 2020, <https://www.bonappetit.com/story/howard-conyers>.

access to capital to start their own businesses and a long-standing belief “that Black people made the best barbecue.”<sup>104</sup>

Despite the success of many white family-owned whole hog establishments, black pitmasters within Eastern whole hog barbecue have been unable to continue their successful businesses before and through the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite their survival through the pandemic, Grady’s Barbecue, a family run whole hog business that is the last, black-owned whole hog establishment in North Carolina, the Grady’s business will retire with them because of a lack of family interest. At over eighty years old, the Gradys have created a restaurant over the years that has become a staple within the eastern North Carolina whole hog community. Stephen Grady learned how to cook whole hog barbecue by working pits with his grandfather and later his father as a part of community and family events as his grandfather had been their community’s “local pitmaster for hire.”<sup>105</sup> They fell into owning their own restaurant when Stephen’s brother opened the shack originally in 1986, but after opening the first day decided he could not take the smoke and passed the business on to his brother.<sup>106</sup>

Despite their passion for barbecue, the Grady’s business is only open these days when Stephen and Gerri Grady can work the pits and restaurant themselves as “their children from previous marriages “didn’t want any part of the business.”<sup>107</sup> The Grady’s family business will likely close with their retirement or death as a result of the common problem of a lack of interest in the hard work of restaurant life and the long hours and dedication it takes to cook whole hog barbecue. As mentioned in a *Huffington Post* article surrounding the death of many families’

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<sup>104</sup> Adrian Miller, *Black Smoke: African Americans and the United States of Barbecue* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 97.

<sup>105</sup> Fertel, *One True Barbecue*, 125.

<sup>106</sup> Fertel, *One True Barbecue*, 122.

<sup>107</sup> Fertel, *One True Barbecue*, 130.

whole hog businesses, “Grady’s Barbecue ... will retire along with them, as will their chopped barbecue plate with coleslaw and hushpuppies.”<sup>108</sup> The trend of establishments closing among barbecue families is common as there is an increasing lack of interest in younger generations to engage with North Carolina whole hog barbecue. Dr. Conyers touches on this trend by stating “Most of the Black pitmasters I’ve visited could retire any day now. And most of their children aren’t interested in taking over. I can’t argue with them because I understand the hard work that keeps it going.”<sup>109</sup> Whole hog barbecue is a tradition passed down through generations across Eastern Carolina, but the lack of interest by younger generations, such as the Grady’s children, puts the existence of black-owned whole hog barbecue establishments into question.

The stress of entrepreneurship can make or break a family business, especially within the world of barbecue. In *Full Circle: The Ballad of Rodney and Roscoe*, Roscoe Hall II specifically addresses how the stresses of being a black entrepreneur led to the failure of his family's business. Roscoe Hall was the grandson of famous barbecue pitmaster John C. Bishop, who owned and operated Dreamland Barbecue in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. However, over the years of operating the business, the stress of money, pleasing customers, and trying to create a cohesive family dynamic eventually shattered their family business and led to them selling Dreamland Barbecue.<sup>110</sup> Hall highlights the struggles that entrepreneurs face when trying to start and create a lasting family business within barbecue, but especially as black entrepreneurs. In contrast to the stories of the Gradys and the Halls, Ed Mitchell, who is a very famous and controversial figure within the Eastern Carolina whole hog tradition, and his family break the mold of the

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<sup>108</sup> Sara Ventiera, “A New Generation of Pitmasters Is Preserving the Art of Whole Hog Barbecue,” *HuffPost* (HuffPost, June 20, 2017), [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/how-a-new-generation-of-pitmasters-is-preserving-the-art-of-whole-hog-barbecue\\_n\\_5949579ae4b0b90e99aa3834](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/how-a-new-generation-of-pitmasters-is-preserving-the-art-of-whole-hog-barbecue_n_5949579ae4b0b90e99aa3834).

<sup>109</sup> Conyers and Cadigan, “This Rocket Scientist Is Tracing Black Ingenuity through Barbecue”.

<sup>110</sup> Southern Foodways, *Full Circle: The Ballad of Rodney And Roscoe*.

abandonment of family business by younger generations. After ending his time at the Pit restaurant in Raleigh, North Carolina, Mitchell and his son Ryan, who was formerly in investment banking, have decided to try to expand Mitchell's brand and open a new restaurant.<sup>111</sup> However, even Ryan was reluctant to return to join the family business as he did not believe that the time put into barbecue would give him a worthwhile "return on investment."<sup>112</sup> The Mitchells had planned to open the Preserve, in Raleigh, NC during 2021, but COVID-19 stalled their progress and they are continuing to run as a takeout business only.<sup>113</sup> The Mitchells display one example of a black whole-hog based family business trying to start out and capitalize on the recent changes in the barbecue scene, but even they have hit hiccups in the road and have been unable to fully achieve their goal. In North Carolina whole hog barbecue, family businesses are dying because of changing times and conditions, but especially for black entrepreneurs and pitmasters.

### III. Access to Capital

It is impossible to discuss the many troubles that black pitmasters have faced in trying to start their own establishments without discussing the role that having a lack of access to capital has played on them and on black entrepreneurs as a whole. Whole hog barbecue takes its roots in largely rural communities in North Carolina and traditions dating back to the plantation era and beyond. However, in the 1970s and 1980s, even after the repeal of Jim Crow legislation, black farmers from these rural areas where whole hog barbecue was being taught and passed down within communities were unable to get loans from banks to help support their farms or try to

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<sup>111</sup> Ventiera, "A New Generation of Pitmasters Is Preserving the Art of Whole Hog Barbecue".

<sup>112</sup> Miller, *Black Smoke*, 256.

<sup>113</sup> "Home: The Preserve BBQ," Home | The Preserve BBQ, accessed December 7, 2021, <https://www.thepreservebbq.com/>.

start other businesses, such as whole hog barbecue establishments.<sup>114</sup> These economic hurdles led to pitmasters either continuing to operate just at local community or family events or as a catering business, such as Stephen Grady's grandfather who "traveled around the county with a metal grate and two tobacco sticks, digging holes to cook over."<sup>115</sup> The lack of loans and capital available to whole hog pitmasters stunted their ability overtime to create restaurants. Even beyond the turn to the 21st century, we see rises in the prices of what it takes to cook whole hog barbecue turning many away from trying to pursue a career and livelihood within the industry.

The increase in prices for hogs and other items needed to craft Eastern style whole hog barbecue has impacted all in the industry, but they have specifically hit black pitmasters hard because of the historic and systemic lack of access to capital they have and continue to experience. As discussed in William A. Darity and A. Kirsten Mullen's book *From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-First Century*, many existing and new black businesses experience "discriminatory practices by lending agencies that frequently outright deny them loans or only offer loans at exorbitant terms."<sup>116</sup> During the 1920s and 1930s, there was a boom in black businesses with "103,872 individual enterprises" owned by black entrepreneurs across the country by 1932.<sup>117</sup> However, after the Great Depression, only 87,475 remained with a 16% loss as a result of economic depression and an inability to achieve loans.<sup>118</sup> Even in more prosperous eras, such as the 1960s and 1970s, black entrepreneurs and pitmasters continued to struggle as they experienced what scholars have labeled as "documentable

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<sup>114</sup> Conyers and Cadigan, "This Rocket Scientist Is Tracing Black Ingenuity through Barbecue".

<sup>115</sup> Conyers and Cadigan, "This Rocket Scientist Is Tracing Black Ingenuity through Barbecue".

<sup>116</sup> William A. Darity and A. Kirsten Mullen, "Myths of Racial Equality," in *From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-First Century* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020), pp. 28-48, 38.

<sup>117</sup> Flournoy A. Coles, "Financial Institutions and Black Entrepreneurship," *Journal of Black Studies* 3, no. 3 (1973): pp. 329-349, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002193477300300305>, 330.

<sup>118</sup> Coles, "Financial Institutions and Black Entrepreneurship", 330.

difficulties and failures due to inability to obtain necessary loans or credits was due, at least in part, to the fact that the skin of the owners was the wrong color.”<sup>119</sup> In addition to not being able to obtain credit on their own, black entrepreneurs in the South often could not get a loan unless a white man vouched for them and their business.<sup>120</sup> In *Black Smoke*, Adrian Miller comments on how this trend negatively impacted black pitmasters. He writes that “without access to credit, black barbecue entrepreneurs must resort to using their own wealth or obtain private financing from relatives, friends, or extended social networks.”<sup>121</sup> The inability for black pitmasters in North Carolina to obtain capital as a result of their place within Southern society caused them to be unable to obtain necessary funds for not just starting their own barbecue establishments, but also in order to upkeep their restaurants as they had to rely on those around them for support.

Opening a whole hog barbecue establishment is more involved and entails more costs than would face most other restaurateurs. Eastern North Carolina whole hog barbecue requires two main elements that are often costly for pitmasters to obtain and for them to be able to continue funding for their business. These two elements are purchasing whole hogs and purchasing wood to cook their meat. The taste that defines the whole hog style of cooking is the fat and moisture of the meat along with the rich flavor that smoking the meat on real charcoal creates. However, these two elements are very costly in today’s economy, which can deter pitmasters from trying to become establishment owners.

When discussing the price to run whole hog establishments and the obstacles that face black pitmasters, the cost that wood plays in cooking whole hog in the traditional style should be considered. Two famous North Carolina and barbecue historians, John Shelton Reed and Dale

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<sup>119</sup> Coles, “Financial Institutions and Black Entrepreneurship”, 332.

<sup>120</sup> Miller, *Black Smoke*, 140.

<sup>121</sup> Miller, *Black Smoke*, 140.

Volberg Reed, highlight that at Skylight Inn “the bill for oak and hickory burned in 2000 amounted to \$23,000.”<sup>122</sup> In addition to Shelton, Scott discusses the struggles of sourcing wood for pitmasters in the documentary *CUT/CHOP/COOK*. In the documentary, Scott discusses how Hemingway, South Carolina community members would call him up after a storm when they had trees down that they thought he could use for his barbecue as source wood for his charcoal. He also goes into detail regarding how he processes his own wood in the woodyard behind his establishment and pits.<sup>123</sup> Scott highlights the need for wood in whole hog barbecue and the lengths that many pitmasters go to source it because of its rising costs. This difficulty has caused “generations-old barbecue restaurants to have either closed or switched to gas or electric heat” in North Carolina.<sup>124</sup> In 2002, a report found that only one third of 126 North Carolina barbecue establishments cooked entirely with hardwood or charcoal, which is required to traditionally prepare Eastern style North Carolina whole hog barbecue.<sup>125</sup> The cost to upkeep this traditional style of wood-cooked barbecue is contributing to the extinction of whole hog barbecue establishments, not just owned by black pitmasters, but also as a whole. As Jim Early, founder of the North Carolina Barbecue Society, notes “by the time you buy the wood, pay a pit master, pay the higher insurance rates caused by chimney fires, operating a real pit is like pushing a Cadillac uphill with a rope.”<sup>126</sup> Early highlights how expensive trying to open a whole hog barbecue business can be, which, for black pitmasters, is further exacerbated by the lack of whole hog family business that have already established themselves and by the lack of access to capital

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<sup>122</sup> Reed, Reed, and McKinney, *Holy Smoke*, 203.

<sup>123</sup> *CUT/CHOP/COOK*, *Southern Foodways Alliance*, accessed December 7, 2021, <https://www.southernfoodways.org/film/cut-chop-cook/>.

<sup>124</sup> Ventiera, “A New Generation of Pitmasters Is Preserving the Art of Whole Hog Barbecue”.

<sup>125</sup> Reed, Reed, and McKinney, *Holy Smoke*, 280.

<sup>126</sup> Reed, Reed, and McKinney, *Holy Smoke*, 281.

funding that many black pitmasters in the rural areas where North Carolina Eastern whole hog barbecue is traditionally found.

The cost of opening a wood burning whole hog establishment is also further exacerbated by the risk of fires that pitmasters face. One of the main dangers of cooking whole hog barbecue is the large amount of fat that drips while the hog is cooking. As Scott describes the process and the hissing sound this makes, he says “that's the fat rendering through the meat ... When it drips into the fire, the steam shoots right back up into the meat.”<sup>127</sup> Despite the necessity for this process to instill the melt-in-your-mouth flavor that has come to be associated with Eastern whole hog barbecue, it can also be dangerous. The steam and flame that is caused by the dripping fat can catch alight and burn whole establishments to the ground, which is what happened to Scott’s establishment in 2013.<sup>128</sup> A similar fire happened at Jones’ Bar-B-Q, a famous black-owned barbecue establishment in Marianna, Arkansas, in 2021 that destroyed over 70% of the historic restaurant.<sup>129</sup> Grease fires, such as those that frequently occur at whole hog establishments, can be devastating as they are difficult to put out once they spread as they cannot be extinguished with water and traditional methods to stop fires that often affect structures.<sup>130</sup>

Rodney Scott, himself, had suffered two spitfires before the one that destroyed his pits and had attended a fundraiser a year before his fire to help Sam’s Bar-B-Q in Tennessee raise money to rebuild their restaurant after a grease fire.<sup>131</sup> Fires are so frequent in the barbecue

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<sup>127</sup> Debbie Elliott, “When His Pit Burned down, Southern BBQ Master Took Hogs on Tour,” KDLG, accessed December 7, 2021, <https://www.kdlg.org/post/when-his-pit-burned-down-southern-bbq-master-took-hogs-tour#stream/0>.

<sup>128</sup> Elliott, “When His Pit Burned down, Southern BBQ Master Took Hogs on Tour”.

<sup>129</sup> Brett Anderson, “Fire Damages Jones' Bar-B-Q, a Historic Black-Owned Business,” *The New York Times* (*The New York Times*, March 1, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/01/dining/jones-bar-b-q-fire.html>.

<sup>130</sup> “How to Put out a Grease Fire - Lincoln County,” accessed December 7, 2021, <https://www.lincolncounty.org/DocumentCenter/View/7740/How-to-Put-Out-a-Grease-Fire?bidId=>.

<sup>131</sup> Fertel, *One True Barbecue*, 205.



industry and especially whole hog barbecue, that the FatBack Collective, raises money to help aid pitmasters who need financial assistance with their rebuilding efforts after grease fires.<sup>132</sup> The FatBack Collective is a collection of chefs, restaurateurs, farmers, and writers including the founder Nick Pihakis, Donald Link, John Currence, Ashley Christensen, Sean Brock, Pat Martin and Southern Foodways Alliance's John T. Edge.<sup>133</sup> They started as a group focused on bringing back the raising of heritage breed pigs within the South, but also became a charitable organization and hosts many charity benefits a year that support the "community, ... farmers, artisans and progressive causes".<sup>134</sup> The FatBack collective and their charitable initiatives have frequently come to include whole hog restaurants plagued by grease fires, such as Sam's Bar-B-Q and Scott's Bar-B-Que, as they support all those involved in the pork industry from "the farmers who humanely raise them, the cooks who coax flavor from them, and the celebrants who commune around them", which includes whole hog pitmasters.<sup>135</sup>

As mentioned earlier by Jim Early, the nature of cooking with wood causes pitmasters in Eastern North Carolina whole hog barbecue to face large fees for insurance to cover their pits and establishments. On the other hand, those who are unable to pay these high prices for insurance face another potential large cost when opening a whole hog establishment as they would have to pay the entire cost of a repair to their building if a grease fire took place on their property. As small and large grease fires are almost inevitable when cooking fatty whole pigs over live coals multiple days a week, the potential cost of this problem can deter pitmasters from opening their own establishments. With a lack of access to capital over the decades, it can cause black pitmasters to shutter their doors or decide not to open them in the first place.

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<sup>132</sup> Fertel, *One True Barbecue*, 207.

<sup>133</sup> "The Fatback Collective," FatBack, accessed April 20, 2022, <https://www.fatbackpig.com/fatback-collective>.

<sup>134</sup> FatBack, "The Fatback Collective".

<sup>135</sup> FatBack, "The Fatback Collective".

In addition to the costly nature of cooking with wood, the increasing cost of whole hogs has deterred many pitmasters from entering the arena of opening whole hog barbecue restaurants. Whole hogs are a more expensive option for many pitmasters who want to enter the barbecue industry. Cheaper alternatives, such as the pork shoulder, weigh between twelve and twenty pounds, which makes them easier to manage than moving around a whole hog that can weigh hundreds of pounds. There also is minimal waste with a shoulder, and it is easier for purveyors to supply for pitmasters.<sup>136</sup> As Chris Siler of Siler's Old Time BBQ noted, switching from whole hogs to shoulders allowed him to double and sometimes triple more servable meat per pound than from whole hog. In *The One True Barbecue: Fire, Smoke, and the Pitmasters Who Cook the Whole Hog*, Rien Fertel acknowledges the benefits of this change when he writes: "I gathered that the changeover must have been worth it: the financial stability, the recognition gained by cooking for thousands, and the hours freed to spend with his family instead of sawing off hogs' feet and staring at the fire."<sup>137</sup> In addition to these benefits, the nature of the flavor of a whole hog has changed over the years. Some in whole hog barbecue, such as Ed Mitchell, believe that only heritage hogs, hogs that are raised by animal welfare standards and without hormones, "ensured greater fat-to-muscle marbling, tenderness, and flavor."<sup>138</sup> Mitchell also planned on continuing the usage of this type of pork at his new restaurant in order to give customers "an idea of what barbecue was like a century ago."<sup>139</sup> Mitchell exposes many of the issues that pitmasters face with being able to source hogs as most are forced to buy hogs from major manufactures that are not able to achieve the fat to muscle ratio that pitmasters had been able to achieve by buying from local farmers. This change makes it economically difficult for Eastern North Carolina

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<sup>136</sup> Fertel, *One True Barbecue*, 251.

<sup>137</sup> Fertel, *One True Barbecue*, 252.

<sup>138</sup> Fertel, *One True Barbecue*, 202.

<sup>139</sup> Miller, *Black Smoke*, 257.

pitmasters to retain the same quality and taste over the years and makes the idea of maintaining or opening a whole hog barbecue business more unattractive to black entrepreneurs and pitmasters

In addition to the difficulty of retaining the quality of whole hog barbecue over time, the price of hogs has increased. In recent years, the hog industry has been in decline with slaughterhouses closing and farmers leaving the business. This change led competitors of whole hog restaurants buying up many futures and causing the hog prices to greatly increase.<sup>140</sup> Since this decline in the hog industry, the COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the problem. Between September 2020 and September 2021, the cost of pork rose by 12.7% across the country.<sup>141</sup> This situation can possibly be getting even worse for pitmasters as there continues to be increases in prices for pork while the meat availability is decreasing, which is tied to the supply chain processing levels because of a lack of workers related to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>142</sup> Over the years, there has been a transition from local pork farmers being the main suppliers of the market for the nation and whole hog barbecue industry, but this has shifted over the years with the abandonment of the hog industry by farmers and the rise of large corporations. At the current moment, over 55-85% of the pork market is controlled by the four biggest meat processing companies in the nation.<sup>143</sup> This transition from relying on local businesses and their prices to relying on the rising cost of large corporations has greatly damaged the whole hog barbecue industry. This change has made the potential cost of opening a barbecue establishment astronomically larger than it would have been in earlier decades. The nation's shift toward this

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<sup>140</sup> Fertel, *One True Barbecue*, 251.

<sup>141</sup> Jeremy Harlan, "Soaring Meat Prices a Tough Sell for Barbecue Pitmasters," CNN (Cable News Network, October 22, 2021), <https://www.cnn.com/2021/10/22/business/bbq-prices-increasing/index.html>.

<sup>142</sup> Harlan, "Soaring Meat Prices a Tough Sell for Barbecue Pitmasters".

<sup>143</sup> Harlan, "Soaring Meat Prices a Tough Sell for Barbecue Pitmasters".

less agricultural environment, specifically in North Carolina, has inhibited pitmasters from easy access to the ingredients they need at a price that makes owning an establishment possible. The cost of whole hogs has deterred black pitmasters from entering the barbecue industry because it makes the decision to open a whole hog establishment a poor economic choice for an entrepreneur.

#### IV. Conclusion

When examining the success of black whole hog barbecue pitmasters, it is impossible to ignore the success, fame, and entrepreneurial savvy of Rodney Scott. However, Scott's success has been unable to be recreated within the North Carolina whole hog community as evident by the Grady's ownership of the last black owned whole hog establishment in the entire state of North Carolina. However, a multitude of factors play a large role in this phenomenon. The rising prices of wood and whole hogs have deterred and made opening a whole hog establishment economically non-viable for many black pitmasters as it greatly decreases the profitability potential of the businesses. This trend coupled with a lack of interest by younger generations of following into their family businesses has caused a depletion in the number of black pitmasters entering the arena of whole hog barbecue and increasing the life span of currently existing establishments by capitalizing on the recent trend of commercialization within the industry. The duality of being a pitmaster and an entrepreneur is incredibly important to remember when analyzing the lack of Eastern North Carolina whole hog barbecue restaurants still in operation. Many family business owners are holding onto their businesses by the skin of their teeth while others are flourishing, but the lack of capital that black pitmasters faced for generations led to many being unable to open their own establishments. This lack of capital decreased the initial number of pitmasters starting barbecue establishments. In addition, the deterrence of black

entrepreneurs and pitmasters from entering this cuisine because of its increasing lack of economic viability shows one of the many reasons that black pitmasters have been excluded from the commercialization within Eastern North Carolina whole hog barbecue. Through the disinterest of younger generations, rising costs of wood, fire, and hogs, and a lack of access to capital that has persisted through the centuries, black pitmasters and entrepreneurs have been unable to cash in on the recent trend of commercialization within Eastern North Carolina whole hog barbecue.

## Chapter 3: Barbecue and Media

In the restaurant business, the media can be a chef's best friend or worst enemy. It can make or break chefs' careers or ultimately kill an entire cuisine. Whole hog barbecue has both benefited and fallen victim to this arena. It is a regional cuisine subject to the stereotypes and stigma surrounding barbecue and the American South while also being a key centerpiece of the early cuisines that have come out of the United States. Journalist and playwright George Packer writes in a 2013 *New Yorker* article that "the Southern way of life began to be embraced around the country until, in a sense, it came to stand for the 'real America': country music and Lynyrd Skynyrd, barbecue and NASCAR, political conservatism, God and guns, the code of masculinity, militarization, hostility to unions, and suspicion of government authority."<sup>144</sup> Barbecue has received an image in recent decades of not only being a cuisine within the South, but also being a centerpiece of the Southern identity as a result of the involvement of the press within the realm of American culinary tradition.

Whole hog barbecue has established a unique place for itself within this patchwork of barbecue history over the past centuries. It has been discussed in everything from 1917 instructional guides provided to students at NC State University in Raleigh, North Carolina to being featured in a segment in Paula Deen's Food Network cooking show, "Paula's Home," in the early 2000s as barbecue started sweeping the Food Network as it became a more popular and familiar cuisine within the consciousness of everyday Americans beyond the borders of Eastern North Carolina.<sup>145</sup> Many restaurants and pitmasters have been able to capitalize on this movement from more local publications to the national stage in order to improve their business.

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<sup>144</sup> George Packer, "Southern Discomfort," *The New Yorker* (The New Yorker, January 14, 2013), <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/01/21/southern-discomfort-4>.

<sup>145</sup> Bob Garner, *Bob Garner's Book of Barbecue: North Carolina's Favorite Food* (Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair, 2012), 81.

Some examples include Ed Mitchell, the Jones family of Skylight Inn and Sam Jones' BBQ, and the owners of the Pit in downtown Raleigh. With the exception of Ed Mitchell, it is difficult to find black pitmasters in North Carolina profiting off the recent commercialization and attention being paid to the style of whole hog barbecue. This trend of "a blackout of African Americans or whitewashing" of barbecue and whole hog barbecue is nothing new within the arena of food-related media, but it is becoming more of a divisive issue.<sup>146</sup>

In *Black Smoke*, Adrian Miller lists a recipe for what he calls "Disappearing Black Barbecue." In the recipe, he includes "Media platform of any type" as an ingredient and an important first step:

Display laziness by refusing to research previous stories on your, or another, media platform about barbecue in your area. This is especially important if you work for a print publication that's been operating for more than twenty years. Otherwise, you'll probably find stories about African American barbecuers.<sup>147</sup>

Miller highlights how the media has chosen to exclude black pitmasters either out of laziness, tradition, or choice within their practices. This exclusion has wreaked havoc for black pitmasters within the cuisines of Eastern North Carolina whole hog as they are unable to achieve the exposure needed to keep their business going or start a new venture in an already economically strained cuisine and environment for all pitmasters, but even more so for black potential and current restaurant owners. As a result of past exclusion from media sources, such as newspapers, magazines, and television, black pitmasters are being excluded from the recent trend of commercialization within whole hog barbecue.

#### I. Friendship with Newspaper

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<sup>146</sup> Adrian Miller, *Black Smoke: African Americans and the United States of Barbecue* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 225.

<sup>147</sup> Adrian Miller, *Black Smoke*, 229.

Of all media, whole hog barbecue has received the most attention in newspapers from its start in more local publications to its eventual entrance into the arena of world-renowned critics in national publications. At the start of the 20th century, most newspaper coverage of whole hog barbecue centered around the coverage of community events, such political rallies, or community holiday gatherings. In the September 2, 1959 edition of the *Tabor City Tribune*, the Tabor City, North Carolina newspaper advertises a community event surrounding barbecue. “The Williams Township Ruritan Society is going ‘Whole Hog’ Saturday 5, 1959,” the paper reported<sup>148</sup> This brief article highlights the specific role that Eastern North Carolina whole hog barbecue has within community spaces as it brings the community together. Yet the article also hints at one of the problems that would eventually hurt black pitmasters. The article fails to mention any of the pitmasters attending the event, their establishments, or anything regarding the hog cooking process.<sup>149</sup> Newspapers often failed to recognize pitmasters of any background for their skills or the establishments they were connected to during this period. While the article mentions whole hog barbecue to entice people to attend a community event, it kept the identity of the skilled pitmaster a mystery.

In addition to these community centered events, barbecue was also considered an important tool to advertise for businesses, such as stores or business openings. In the May 26, 1925 edition of the *Greenville Daily Reflector*, William H. Moore, a white sharecropper, highlighted the grand opening of his Green Wreath Park, which was meant to cater to the African American community of Pitt County, North Carolina. When advertising the grand opening in the

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<sup>148</sup> “Williams Holding Barbecue,” *Library of Congress*, accessed October 19, 2021, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn91068761/1959-09-02/ed-1/seq-1/#date1=1777&index=0&rows=20&words=Barbecue+Hog+Whole&searchType=basic&sequence=0&state=North+Carolina&date2=1963&proxtext=whole+hog+barbecue&y=24&x=21&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1>.

<sup>149</sup> “Williams Holding Barbecue,” *Library of Congress*.



*Daily Reflector*, for the “grand opening, Moore offered guests “free bathing privileges,” “barbecue cooked the old-fashioned way,” and “musical entertainment”.<sup>150</sup> Moore’s advertisement suggests the cooking of whole hog barbecue through its discussion of barbecue cooked in an old fashioned way, but it also fails to mention the roles of those who would be cooking the barbecue as it just focuses on what type of food will be served at the event as opposed to the culinary expertise or history of those chosen to make the items.

In addition to this early newspaper advertisement, whole hog barbecue is also mentioned within N.C. State University’s *Curing Meat on the Farm or Extension Circular No. 4*, which details the process of smoking meat within the agricultural landscape of North Carolina during 1915.<sup>151</sup> The circular specifically discusses the process of how to smoke a whole roast pig. It discusses the process from beginning to end, such as how to choose what kind of hog to butcher, how to butcher it, how to dress it, and how to smoke the meat.<sup>152</sup> The circular is a guide to help teach those on hog farms how to smoke their own pigs for consumption and better storage, but they fail to discuss the art form that smoking whole hogs and cooking Eastern North Carolina Barbecue can be. Newspapers and circulars from this early part of the 20th century failed to consider anything beyond what barbecue was at face value, food, and ignored the important role and skill of the pitmasters that cooked the cuisine everyday as a part of their routine as agricultural workers and as a service or commodity for community consumption and enjoyment.

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<sup>150</sup> Andrew W. Kahrl, “The ‘Negro Park’ Question: Land, Labor, and Leisure in Pitt County, North Carolina, 1920–1930,” *The Journal of Southern History* 79, no. 1 (February 2013): pp. 113-142, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23795405>, 122.

<sup>151</sup> Gray, *Curing Meat on the Farm*.

<sup>152</sup> Gray, *Curing Meat on the Farm*.

Through the 1960s and 1970s, there was an increased interest in barbecue within the newspaper industry and it soon started to spread beyond the Mason-Dixon line. Barbecue started to enter into the headlines across the nation in a variety of ways. In the days following January 27, 1964, barbecue entered the minds of many Americans as a result of the sit-in that occurred in Asheboro, North Carolina at Hops Bar-B-Que.<sup>153</sup> Hops Bar-B-Que had been around since the 1950s, but the newspaper articles surrounding the sit-in not only brought barbecue and its place within southern society to the forefront of the public's mind during the 1960s, but also brought and still brings attention to the role of race and its long entanglement within the barbecue industry.<sup>154</sup> The sit-in at Hops Bar-B-Que brought attention to not just the segregation in barbecue restaurants across the country, but the segregation that existed within the consumption of barbecue, which had always been a symbol of community and unity within North Carolina.

Black pitmasters received some recognition in black-oriented newspapers. For example, a Chicago Metro News article from June 2, 1979 entitled "North Carolina: Eatin High on the Hog" stated the author's intention of exposing their readers to the traditions surrounding whole hog barbecue within Eastern North Carolina. *Chicago Metro News* was the "largest Black oriented weekly circulated in [the] Chicago area."<sup>155</sup> The newspaper showcased the tradition of pig picking's within North Carolina where party attendees would pick their own meat off of the hog as if it was a dish on a buffet line, which it oftentimes was.<sup>156</sup> For the article, the author chose to interview Carl D. Hodges, an African American professor from North Carolina University at

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<sup>153</sup> Larry Penkava, "50th Anniversary of the Sit-Ins at Hops Bar-B-Que, Woolworth's, and Center Theater," *The Randolph Guide*, August 23, 2013, 1.

<sup>154</sup> David Landsel, "The Best Barbecue in Every State," *Food & Wine*, accessed October 19, 2021, <https://www.foodandwine.com/travel/best-bbq-restaurants>.

<sup>155</sup> "Chicago Metro News (Chicago, Ill.) 1972-Current," The Library of Congress, accessed April 14, 2022, <https://www.loc.gov/item/sn84024069/>.

<sup>156</sup> "North Carolina; Eatin High on the Hog," *Chicago Metro News*, June 2, 1979, 24.

Raleigh's Extension Service, who described the process of cooking whole hog for the reader alongside unique Eastern North Carolina barbecue traditions and his entrance into the barbecue arena.<sup>157</sup> *Chicago Metro News*' article shows the trend of this period to discuss more of the background of barbecue as a cuisine, but it also exposes the many black voices and pitmasters who are participating in the barbecue arena during this period. Despite this newspaper's efforts to show the many efforts of black pitmasters within the whole hog barbecue, most newspapers continued to ignore their contributions and focus on the achievements of white pitmasters, especially with regards to pitmasters who were restaurant owners.

It has only been in the past decade that we have seen newspapers try to bring attention to the specific efforts of black establishment owners and pitmasters within the arena of whole hog barbecue and barbecue in general. In the now famous *New York Times* article "Pig, Smoke, Pit: This Food Is Seriously Slow," John T. Edges gushes about his experience at Rodney Scott's Scott's Bar-B-Q in Hemingway, South Carolina.<sup>158</sup> In almost salivating detail, he describes how Rodney Scott "seasoned the pig with lashings of salt, red pepper, black pepper and Accent."<sup>159</sup> John T. Edge brought the nation's attention to Scott and his establishment through this one newspaper article that led to the launching of Scott's rise to fame as he mentions in his Netflix *Chef's Table BBQ* episode.<sup>160</sup> However, this attention is rarely showered upon Eastern North Carolina black pitmasters apart from a few select family businesses for whom it is often too late for media attention to save.

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<sup>157</sup> "North Carolina; Eatin High on the Hog," *Chicago Metro News*, 24.

<sup>158</sup> John T. Edge, "Pig, Smoke, Pit: This Food Is Seriously Slow," *The New York Times* (*The New York Times*, June 9, 2009), <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/10/dining/10United.html>.

<sup>159</sup> Edge, "Pig, Smoke, Pit: This Food Is Seriously Slow".

<sup>160</sup> *Chef's Table: BBQ*, *Chef's Table BBQ* (Netflix, 2020), <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81292974?trackId=13752289&tctx=0%2C0%2C12e185a1d0397d10ce0ce8b5b358b1fb535d2d5c%3A41c425c08138cd050ba65a051f58e52f6030a738%2C12e185a1d0397d10ce0ce8b5b358b1fb535d2d5c%3A41c425c08138cd050ba65a051f58e52f6030a738%2Cunknown%2C> .

One such family is the Gradys, who are owners of the last surviving black-owned whole hog establishments in Eastern North Carolina. In 2021, the Gradys were at the center of numerous newspaper articles, such as one in the *Fayetteville Observer*, that detailed their struggles during the COVID-19 pandemic and their struggles to survive it.<sup>161</sup> They specifically draw attention to the fact that the pandemic has left Grady's BBQ as the last black-owned establishment in the state of North Carolina to be cooking whole hog barbecue. However, as mentioned in the previous chapter, this article is too late for an industry that has been plagued with economic difficulties, disinterest within families to continue the business, and a lack of access to capital, which are issues that have prevented black pitmasters from entering the business previously and still impact them today. The uptick in newspaper articles highlighting the struggles of black pitmasters and their dying place in the business are too little, too late for most black-owned establishments.

## II. Magazines

Magazines have engaged in similar practices in their coverage of Eastern North Carolina whole hog pitmasters. As noted with the trends in the newspaper industries, magazines started to experience an uptick in reporting regarding barbecue and, specifically, North Carolina barbecue during the 1960s and 1970s. One of the main forces in the magazine industry within the American South throughout the last few decades has been *Southern Living* magazine. *Southern Living* during the 1960s and 1970s showcased the best places for upper-class white Southerners to travel and eat, while also including numerous articles surrounding cooking and gardening.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>161</sup>“NC Whole Hog BBQ Is Part of State's Culinary History,” *The Fayetteville Observer* (*The Fayetteville Observer*, July 28, 2021), <https://www.fayobserver.com/story/lifestyle/2021/07/28/north-carolina-whole-hog-bbq/8025994002/>.

<sup>162</sup> *Southern Living*, 1969-1975.

However, these articles rarely mentioned barbecue and, when they did, they never discussed North Carolina Eastern whole hog. Of *Southern Living's* issues from 1968 through 1975, there were only four instances where barbecue was mentioned.<sup>163</sup> Two of these instances were barbecue recipes<sup>164</sup> and the other two were advertisements for a portable grill and smoker.<sup>165</sup> In one of the aforementioned barbecue cooking sections, the author, Dorothy Sinz, lists three different styles of barbecue sauce and, out of the three, none of the sauces were vinegar based or close to the vinegar-pepper only style of Eastern North Carolina.<sup>166</sup> In *Southern Living's* vision of the South, “barbecue” was ribs, chicken, and tomato-based sauces, not whole hog. Although it was a magazine devoted to Southern culture, *Southern Living* did not play a significant role in increasing the national exposure of whole hog barbecue.

Despite the exclusion of whole hog barbecue from *Southern Living* during the 1960s and 70s, some magazines did showcase the style. In 1979, National Geographic printed a companion book to their magazine titled *Back Roads America*.<sup>167</sup> The book referred to Eastern North Carolina whole hog barbecue legend and Jones’ family restaurant Skylight Inn as “the barbecue capital of the world.”<sup>168</sup> *National Geographic* put whole hog barbecue on the minds of Americans across the country with a review that showed not just the art of cooking whole hog, but also the uniqueness of Eastern North Carolina barbecue as a cuisine. Despite this spotlight on whole hog barbecue and the establishments that serve it, black pitmasters who had whole hog establishments were noticeably absent from *National Geographic's* book. This exclusion was not

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<sup>163</sup> *Southern Living*, 1969-1975.

<sup>164</sup> Lena Sturges, “Barbecue It To Make It Better,” *Southern Living*, June 1972, 149.

<sup>165</sup> “Southern Living,” *Southern Living*, December 1972, 169.

<sup>166</sup> Dorothy Sinz, “Barbecue Gets Top Billing,” *Southern Living*, July 1969, 39.

<sup>167</sup> “About Us,” Skylight Inn BBQ, accessed April 14, 2022, <https://www.skylightinnbbq.com/about-us>.

<sup>168</sup> John Shelton Reed, Dale Volberg Reed, and William McKinney, *Holy Smoke: The Big Book of North Carolina Barbecue* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 205.

unique to just *National Geographic* and the 1960s and 1970s, but black pitmasters continued to be excluded from magazine publications up through the 2010s.

When examining magazine articles from the 2000s and 2010s, it is impossible to ignore the exclusion of black-owned Eastern North Carolina whole hog establishments. *Southern Living's* 2019 list of “The South's Top 50 Barbecue Joints 2019” lists a variety of barbecue spots across the country known for exceptional barbecue. However, out of the 50 restaurants, only four of them served Eastern North Carolina whole hog barbecue, Buxton Hall Barbecue, Sam Jones’ BBQ, Skylight Inn, and Grady’s BBQ.<sup>169</sup> Within all four of these restaurants, two are owned by the same family, the Jones family, and only one is owned by black pitmasters.<sup>170</sup> This list tries to showcase the barbecue of the Grady’s as a historic, black-owned business, but it also fails to include many other black-owned whole hog establishments and pitmasters that could have used the attention to jump start their careers. In addition to their 2019 list highlighting the best barbecue spots, *Southern Living* also put out a list of “10 of the South's best pitmasters, a diverse group united by a smoky passion.”<sup>171</sup> Out of the 10 pitmasters on the list, three of them were black, including famed pitmaster Rodney Scott of South Carolina, and only one of them cooked Eastern North Carolina whole hog barbecue, Ed Mitchell, who was already a storied celebrity. This article displays the lack of black, Eastern North Carolina whole hog pitmasters that are being considered and awarded by magazines and the broader media as they tend to focus on only the “celebrities” within the industry and rising white pitmasters instead of introducing the public

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<sup>169</sup> “The South's Top 50 Barbecue Joints 2019,” *Southern Living*, accessed October 19, 2021, <https://www.southernliving.com/travel/bbq-restaurants?slide=36c191b1-aabc-4dfd-a623-771bccae8d28#36c191b1-aabc-4dfd-a623-771bccae8d28>.

<sup>170</sup> “The South's Top 50 Barbecue Joints 2019”, *Southern Living*.

<sup>171</sup> “10 Of the South's Best Pitmasters, a Diverse Group United by a Smoky Passion,” *Southern Living Magazine*, <https://www.southernliving.com/travel/barbecue-pitmasters>.

to the newer black voices in Eastern North Carolina whole hog barbecue and giving attention to mainstay institution that had been left behind by the media in the past and continue to struggle.

Despite the focus on *Southern Living*, they are not the only magazine who continued with this trend in the 2000s and 2010s. In *Conde Nast Traveler* magazine's "Best BBQ in America: Top 15 Cities" from 2016, Raleigh was listed as the only city in North Carolina and out of the establishments listed that readers should visit, they suggested The Pit, Clyde Cooper's BBQ, and Ole Time Barbecue.<sup>172</sup> None of these restaurants were owned by black pitmasters. This trend continues in other publications as well, such as *Food & Wine*. The magazine's "The Best BBQ in Every State 2018" lists Skylight Inn as one of their "All-Stars" of barbecue, but fails to list any Eastern North Carolina whole hog establishments in their "Stars on the Rise" section.<sup>173</sup> This exclusion of new whole hog pitmasters within the numerous best barbecue and pitmasters lists of the 2000s and 2010s limited the ability for black pitmasters to try to enter the arena of whole hog barbecue as they are unable to achieve the same media attention and the economic benefits of the inclusion as the magazines fail to look beyond older, white owned establishments.

Magazines have failed to highlight the efforts of black pitmasters within North Carolina barbecue for decades, which has impacted their ability to be included within the recent trend of commercialization within North Carolina barbecue. As pitmasters, such as the Jones' family, are being featured in magazine upon magazine from the 1970s to today, black pitmasters were often excluded or only the most famous were included rarely, such as the Grady's and Ed Mitchell. Media and magazines have played an important role in bringing barbecue and Eastern style whole hog to the forefront of the American palate, but they have not been able to include black

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<sup>172</sup> Chris Chamberlain, "The 15 Best BBQ Cities in America," *Condé Nast Traveler* (*Condé Nast Traveler*, April 7, 2016), <https://www.cntraveler.com/galleries/2016-04-07/best-bbq-in-america-top-15-cities>.

<sup>173</sup> Landsel, "The Best Barbecue in Every State".

pitmasters in this rise, which has resulted in many losing out on financial opportunities and to survive in a business that is only now getting national attention and celebrity.

### III. Barbecue and Television

Barbecue and television have had a much newer relationship with one another. With the founding of food programs and the Food Network on September 27, 1993, cuisines found new ways to reach their audience in new cooking shows that centered around storytelling and travel-based food programs that allowed the viewer to examine travel solely through restaurants.<sup>174</sup>

These programs have allowed many established cuisines to reach new audiences and for viewers to become invested in the stories and dishes of a variety of different establishments. However, when it comes to barbecue and television there has often been an exclusion of black pitmasters from this opportunity.

In *Black Smoke*, Miller particularly harps on this issue at the start of Chapter 9: The Fading Media Representation of African American Barbecuers. He first discusses this exclusion by referencing Fox News' list of "America's most influential BBQ pitmasters and personalities" in 2015. A collective outrage erupted on Twitter regarding this list as there was no member of the list that was a person of color.<sup>175</sup> This lack of "famous" black pitmasters was unsurprising, but also jarring to many viewers as barbecue has always had a diverse array of pitmasters within it and a large and important history of famous black pitmasters over the decades. However, television media often fails to account for this history through a large host of ways and means. This exclusion of black pitmasters within television media goes beyond just news pieces, such as

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<sup>174</sup>“The Founding of the Food Network: A 20 Year Retrospective,” accessed April 15, 2022, [https://events.newschool.edu/event/the\\_founding\\_of\\_the\\_food\\_network\\_a\\_20\\_year\\_retrospective](https://events.newschool.edu/event/the_founding_of_the_food_network_a_20_year_retrospective).

<sup>175</sup> Adrian Miller, *Black Smoke*, 225.



Fox News' list, and also includes cooking shows and lifestyle television like the Food Network and many national television program morning shows.

When examining the role of whole hog barbecue and North Carolina within the realm of television media, it is impossible to ignore the figure of Bob Garner, a pitmaster and a famous television personality within the North Carolina barbecue community who worked at UNC-TV for many years.<sup>176</sup> In his book, *Bob Garner's Book of Barbecue: North Carolina's Favorite Food*, he recounts his experiences on multiple television shows where he has tried to showcase Eastern North Carolina whole hog barbecue and its traditions. When discussing his experience filming a segment with Good Morning America at Duke University, he writes how the producers did not want him to show the whole hog on television.<sup>177</sup> Garner exposes the resistance to the nature of whole hog barbecue that the media had in the 1990s and 2000s. When describing his experience in a segment for Paula Deen's show, *Paula's Home Cooking*, Garner also discusses how he was only allowed to bring a pork shoulder with him and forced to reheat the shoulder on a Weber charcoal grill, which sounds like any true North Carolina pitmasters' greatest nightmare. The 2000s television tried to expose audiences to a manufactured version of barbecue through white hosts, such as Garner, and an attempt to take the whole hog out of the whole hog. This exposure both helped and hindered pitmasters as it helped promote the whole hog within the American consciousness, but only a manufactured version with a lack of hog and a white pitmaster at the helm.

As television moved into the late 2000s and 2010s, whole hog barbecue became less taboo and more of a talking point within food media. With the evolution of the Food Network,

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<sup>176</sup> Bob Garner, *Bob Garner's Book of Barbecue*, I.

<sup>177</sup> Bob Garner, *Bob Garner's Book of Barbecue*, 63.

television started to cater to what foodie's around America wanted.<sup>178</sup> Starting in 2004, they slowly introduced more barbecue centric shows, such as *BBQ with Bobby Flay*, *The BBQ Circuit*, and *Paula's Southern BBQ*.<sup>179</sup> Food Network's rise within the American public during the 2000s allowed it to shape the broader American public's views about barbecue as it often was the largest exposure to it that many Americans had to the cuisine outside of those who lived within the South. However, the majority of the participants in these BBQ centered shows and competitions were white.<sup>180</sup> In another Food Network show, *Top 5 Restaurants*, they showcased their five Best BBQ restaurants in the country and, out of the 5 restaurants, only one served North Carolina Eastern Whole Hog and it was Skylight Inn.<sup>181</sup> These BBQ centered shows provided a new platform for white whole hog pitmasters, but completely failed to provide the same treatment to black pitmasters.

With more recent pushes for changes in the television industry to include more voices of black Americans, there would be an expectation that within barbecue centered media that there would also be a change, but it appears to be a change that is slower than many have hoped for. One example is the show *Ugly Delicious*, which is hosted by David Chang and Peter Meehan.<sup>182</sup> In one episode, they explore many popular barbecue spots across the country, but the majority of the pitmasters they discussed and talked to were white.<sup>183</sup> The only glimmer of hope within this

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<sup>178</sup> Adrian Miller, *Black Smoke*, 231.

<sup>179</sup> Adrian Miller, *Black Smoke*, 231-232.

<sup>180</sup> Adrian Miller, *Black Smoke*, 232.

<sup>181</sup> "Best BBQ: Top 5 Restaurants," Food Network, accessed April 15, 2022, <https://www.foodnetwork.com/shows/top-5-restaurants/episodes/best-bbq>.

<sup>182</sup> *Ugly Delicious: BBQ*, Netflix, 2018, [https://www.netflix.com/watch/80191114?trackId=255824129&tctx=0%2C0%2CNAPA%40%40%7Ce56cae0c-76b6-4317-8fcf-5204dd24b57f-136605696\\_titles%2F1%2F%2Fugly%20%2F0%2F0%2CNAPA%40%40%7Ce56cae0c-76b6-4317-8fcf-5204dd24b57f-136605696\\_titles%2F1%2F%2Fugly%20%2F0%2F0%2Cunknown%2C%2Ce56cae0c-76b6-4317-8fcf-5204dd24b57f-136605696%7C1%2CtitlesResults](https://www.netflix.com/watch/80191114?trackId=255824129&tctx=0%2C0%2CNAPA%40%40%7Ce56cae0c-76b6-4317-8fcf-5204dd24b57f-136605696_titles%2F1%2F%2Fugly%20%2F0%2F0%2CNAPA%40%40%7Ce56cae0c-76b6-4317-8fcf-5204dd24b57f-136605696_titles%2F1%2F%2Fugly%20%2F0%2F0%2Cunknown%2C%2Ce56cae0c-76b6-4317-8fcf-5204dd24b57f-136605696%7C1%2CtitlesResults).

<sup>183</sup> Adrian Miller, *Black Smoke*, 238.

arena is South Carolina whole hog pitmaster Rodney Scott. In 2019, Netflix's hit series *Chef's Table* put out a mini-series surrounding barbecue traditions in the U.S. and abroad. In one of the episodes, they focused on Scott and his rise to celebrity status within the barbecue industry.<sup>184</sup> This episode is one of few examples of African American pitmasters within the cooking style of whole hog barbecue being showcased. Although black pitmasters are barely increasing their foothold within barbecue television media, it is almost impossible to find examples of black Eastern North Carolina whole hog pitmasters with any screen time apart from Ed Mitchell.

Mitchell is one of the few black pitmasters within North Carolina whole hog barbecue to utilize television media to his advantage. Mitchell has been featured in numerous shows over the years, such as *Throwdown! With Bobby Flay*, where he beat the chef in 2009.<sup>185</sup> Mitchell's own barbecue sauce recipe is featured on the Food Network website.<sup>186</sup> Mitchell is one of the few black pitmasters within the arena of whole hog barbecue to capitalize on television media to help his business by imprinting his image and brand into the mind of the American public. However, Mitchell is alone in this ability within black establishment owners cooking in the same style. Apart from Ed Mitchell, it is extremely rare to come across television media featuring black pitmasters cooking Eastern North Carolina barbecue. The Grady's, the owners of the last black-owned whole hog establishment in North Carolina, can only be found in select educational projects, such as those by the Southern Foodways Alliance,<sup>187</sup> and in news reports about their restaurant.<sup>188</sup> Black pitmasters within North Carolina barbecue have been primarily excluded

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<sup>184</sup> Netflix, *Chef's Table: BBQ*.

<sup>185</sup> Adrian Miller, *Black Smoke*, 256.

<sup>186</sup> "Ed Mitchell's Eastern Carolina Barbecue Sauce," Food Network (Food Network, June 2, 2014), <https://www.foodnetwork.com/recipes/ed-mitchells-eastern-carolina-barbecue-sauce-recipe-2108024>.

<sup>187</sup> Gerri Grady and Stephen Grady, *Southern Foodways Alliance*, July 7, 2011, <https://www.southernfoodways.org/interview/gradys-barbecue/>.

<sup>188</sup> "Grady's BBQ: How North Carolina's Only Black-Owned Whole Hog Barbecue Joint Survived the COVID-19 Pandemic," ABC11 Raleigh-Durham (WTVD-TV, April 24, 2021), <https://abc11.com/business/how-one-iconic-nc->

from television media in the past and the recent changes within the industry, which has greatly hurt their ability to cash in on the trends of commercialization and the increase in national attention that whole hog has been receiving in recent years.

#### IV. Change Too Late

Within print and television media, black pitmasters have often been passed over in favor of white barbecue properties and celebrities who have been featured within it for decades. As Miller writes in *Black Smoke* in relation to the inclusion of black pitmasters in media, “the lack of African American representation in barbecue was glaring.”<sup>189</sup> Even within the select few black pitmasters who made it through the cracks of media’s intentional and unintentional censorship, those who cooked Eastern North Carolina whole hog barbecue rarely made the cut through the decades. As a result of this exclusion, pitmasters were unable to receive the same financial benefits and name recognition that their fellow white counterparts were able to achieve within the same arena of whole hog barbecue.

During the early eras of barbecue media, pitmasters were rarely acknowledged for their work and, as the nation moved into the 1960s and 1970s, inclusion appeared to only apply to predominantly white eateries, such as Skylight Inn and many others. This exclusion of most pitmasters from print media might lead some to say that all pitmasters were affected by the exclusion of their names associated with their work. However, as the media slowly reformed and started associating chefs specifically with their work and restaurants, they still failed to include the contributions of black pitmasters or their establishments. Disproportionately, as the commercialization of whole hog barbecue has occurred in the last decade, black pitmasters,

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bbq-joint-survived-the-covid-pandemic/10543450/?fbclid=IwAR3BdjDj3O8if9RMqDlmI9aZbV4V5S7XtSxeNMMyuG4gknE-Rnwz24OAYaX4.

<sup>189</sup> Adrian Miller, *Black Smoke*, 229.

especially those trying to enter the arena of North Carolina whole hog barbecue, have been continually excluded from barbecue literature and television compared to their white peers. Despite increasing calls to change the narrative surrounding one of our nation's most storied cuisines, the media still fails to include the voices of the many black pitmasters who helped create and sustain this rich culinary tradition.

As our nation has moved towards a more inclusive approach to our media usage, the media surrounding barbecue and whole hog specifically have failed to achieve this goal and still ignore black pitmasters despite increased public awareness. As whole hog began to experience commercialization and more media attention during the past few years, the effects of this disregard for black pitmasters has become even more glaring as media outlets continue to promote legendary eateries, which are predominantly white owned, as opposed to supporting new pitmasters in their endeavors to restart the collective of black establishments within the cuisine of North Carolina Eastern whole hog barbecue.

## Conclusion

Black pitmasters have been excluded from North Carolina Eastern whole hog barbecue's recent trend of commercialization, but what does this mean for their future? As previously mentioned, the current state of black-owned whole hog barbecue restaurants looks bleak with only one black-owned establishment left in the entire state of North Carolina. As a result of COVID-19, the other remaining few whole hog establishments owned by black pitmasters had shuttered their doors after surviving the pitfalls that many others had fallen victim to over the years, such as a lack of capital and absence of family or others to take over their business and learn the pits. However, there are other ways that potential pitmasters could try to enter the industry. Some avenues include whole hog competition barbecue and catering, but black pitmasters face obstacles in these fields as well.

When I started researching whole hog barbecue, I became intrigued by the role that whole hog barbecue competitions played in the puzzle of the recent trend of commercialization in whole hog barbecue and black pitmasters' role in it. I started researching competitions, scouring social media for pitmasters to potentially interview, and search for evidence of black pitmasters within the whole hog barbecue competition scene in North Carolina. Through my research, I fell upon the Whole Hog Barbecue Series hosted by the N.C. Pork Council, which hosts whole hog barbecue competitions across North Carolina and a select few in Virginia.<sup>190</sup> I was intrigued to see how many of the participants in these events were black pitmasters. After scouring the winners and participants lists from their 2021 competitions and cross checking them with social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, and other print media, I could

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<sup>190</sup>“About,” Whole Hog Barbecue Series, February 11, 2020, <https://wholehogbarbecue.com/about/>.

only verify one pitmaster who was not white, Travis Jefferson.<sup>191</sup> The only time listed that Travis Jefferson competed with the Whole Hog Barbecue Series was in 2016 at the Spencer-Penn Centre's Pig Cookin' Contest where he placed in third.<sup>192</sup> The lack of black pitmasters is apparent on the Instagram of the Whole Hog Barbecue Series as well. The series' page is littered with images of winners from their past competitions, but, since 2019, the only black pitmasters that have been featured are the Grady's, who do not compete in the Whole Hog Barbecue Series.<sup>193</sup> In a cuisine that had been so prevalent with black pitmasters since its inception through the plantation era, segregation, and through the 1900s, they are almost non-existent within the world of whole hog barbecue competition. Competition barbecue would be an excellent platform for black pitmasters trying to enter the world of whole hog and potentially gain enough following to open a restaurant to get their name out there and gain media attention, but there are few of them entering the world of competition barbecue.

This phenomenon surrounding the lack of black pitmasters in competition barbecue is a potential untapped market for those trying to create a business and following for their barbecue, but COVID-19 exacerbated the potential benefits this arena could have provided. When I was trying to conduct interviews for my research with competition pitmasters and teams, I faced many teams who would reject me straight away or say yes and then fail to answer correspondence about the interview. As a last-ditch effort, I planned a trip to the Whole Hog Barbecue State Championship, which is hosted in Raleigh, North Carolina during the annual IBMA Bluegrass Live! Festival. The championship was supposed to be a part of the festival, but

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<sup>191</sup> Paul Collins, "Cook 'Em Low and Slow,'" *Martinsville Bulletin*, April 10, 2016, [https://martinsvillebulletin.com/news/cook-em-low-and-slow/article\\_6b86f115-7098-507f-9ae5-941baa798127.html](https://martinsvillebulletin.com/news/cook-em-low-and-slow/article_6b86f115-7098-507f-9ae5-941baa798127.html).

<sup>192</sup> "2016," Whole Hog Barbecue Series, January 4, 2019, <https://wholehogbarbecue.com/series-results/2016-2/>.

<sup>193</sup> "Whole Hog Barbecue (@Wholehogbarbecue) Instagram," Whole Hog Barbecue Instagram Page, accessed April 21, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/wholehogbarbecue/>.

with COVID-19 everything changed. Up until the weekend of the festival, the competition was listed on the festival and championship's website as occurring at the annual location in downtown Raleigh. However, the day before the competition, they announced on the Whole Hog Barbecue Series that they were moving the competition to an undisclosed location and that it was now a closed event.<sup>194</sup> COVID has stripped away whole hog competitions' ability to reach out to potential customers, investors, and others as a result of making competitions closed to the public. It has limited the benefit for a pitmaster to enter competition apart from winning the trophy, which can discourage many pitmasters from entering the circuit, especially black pitmasters who might need the exposure of competitions to help their existing businesses to or to try to start one.

Black pitmasters trying to enter into the whole hog industry through competitions, catering, or establishment ownerships do not just face the struggles placed on them by historical precedent, but also the current problems because of the pandemic. There are fewer large events that need catering, such as community, company, and family events. There are fewer people attending competition events or events are still closed to the public with the slow return to events our nation has experienced throughout 2021 and into 2022. Finally, there is a restaurant industry looking less and less viable by the day as the path to create a prospering and thriving business for entrepreneurs with prices for supplies rising astronomically and pandemic related closures still possible. It is impossible to know what the future might hold with regards to the restaurant industry and if it will become as viable as it was once again. However, even if this occurs, the future does not look bright for black Eastern North Carolina whole hog pitmasters. Are we witnessing the death of centuries of tradition in the next few years? It is possible. There is a single black owned establishment serving Eastern North Carolina whole hog barbecue, there are

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<sup>194</sup> "Whole Hog Barbecue (@Wholehogbarbecue) Instagram", Whole Hog Barbecue Instagram Page.



extremely few black pitmasters cooking competition whole hog, and the catering business has suffered extreme losses because of COVID-19. However, it is also possible that we could see the rejuvenation of one of the oldest American cuisines in the hands of savvy black entrepreneurs despite all these uphill battles they will face. Even though this resurgence seems almost impossible, I have hope that black pitmasters and entrepreneurs will break through these barriers and help this cuisine that is an important part of North Carolina and Southern culture continue to survive and thrive.

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