

# Our State

OUR STATE KNOWS BEST

## Our State Knows Best: Barbecue

Find out what three pitmasters have to say about cooking low and slow, their best tips for backyard beginners, and the cardinal rule of smoking 'cue: patience.

by *Connor McNeely*



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*In this monthly online series, we ask the experts to go in-depth on some of our favorite topics from the magazine.*



Barbecue traditions run deep in North Carolina, where regional debates — eastern- vs. Lexington-style — ensue over everything from the cut of the pork to the vinegar or red sauce that coats it to the slaw it's served with. But while the means of smoking the perfect 'cue may vary, most Carolinians can agree that good barbecue should be cooked low and slow. And while our iconic barbecue joints have mastered that skill, it can be a challenge to replicate at home.

“Barbecue speaks a lot of different languages,” says Dr. Dana Hanson, associate professor and extension meat specialist at NC State University. “I love the meat, but the process and how it impacts people has become the most interesting thing for me.”

We sat down with Hanson and two other experts — Matthew Register, owner and pitmaster at [Southern Smoke BBQ](#) in Garland, and Michael Markham, owner and pitmaster of [Big Mike's BBQ](#) in Raleigh — to find out the best woods for a beginner, the smokers they suggest starting with, and how to maintain the elusive perfect temperature.



## Our experts



**Dr. Dana Hanson**

*Associate Professor and Extension Meat Specialist at NC State University*



**Michael Markham**

*Owner and Pitmaster of Big Mike's Barbecue in Raleigh*



**Matthew Register**

*Owner and Pitmaster of Southern Smoke Barbecue in Garland*

## How did you get into smoking barbecue?

**Dr. Dana Hanson:** I grew up on a small farm in southeastern Wisconsin, so animal agriculture has been a part of my life since the day I was born. But 40 years ago, when I was growing up, barbecue was kind of a rare thing. In Wisconsin, bratwurst was king. Fast forward 20 years, when I came to North Carolina, I was like, “This is a whole ‘nother country.” There were the differences between east and west, whole hog versus shoulders, chopped versus pulled, and the sauces — on and on. From there, my love of barbecue was born out of my enthusiasm of coming to the South and seeing how different the barbecue culture is.

**Matthew Register:** I’m one of those guys that literally started in the backyard. My wife’s grandfather and her great-grandfather were in the barbecue business, so I’d pick her grandfather’s brain a little bit, and then all of a sudden I got one of these huge smokers. People started calling me and saying, “Hey, can you cook a hog for our family reunion?” and that’s when Southern Smoke was born. One of my most vivid memories was a little fundraiser on [Carolina Beach](#) in February. It just so happened that there was a snowstorm while we were cooking. I talked some of my buddies into sitting up with me, and we froze. There were 20-mile-per-hour winds, and we were the only ones cooking on a live fire, but we laughed, and I’ll never forget that memory. This was before I had any aspirations of a [barbecue restaurant](#) — it was just something we were doing as buddies.

**Michael Markham:** I started cooking whole pigs for football games and other events as a sophomore at NC State, and I fell in love with doing it. Ten years ago, I went from cooking backyard-style to a professional level when I started the food truck, which turned into Cary and Apex locations more than six years ago.

## What kind of smoker should we start with?

**Matthew Register:** What are you going to use it for? Do you want a grill that just smokes stuff, or do you want a grill that’s versatile? The cheapest option to really get into barbecue is a Weber-Kettle grill. The Big Green Eggs are fantastic, but there’s just something about a Weber-Kettle — there’s a little bit of nostalgia to it.

**Michael Markham:** Pellet smokers are great because they're automated, and they run on their own. Get a Big Green Egg, or what's called a Kamado-style grill. Those are only charcoal and have the best quality right away. If you learn how to use them, you won't even have to use the fans, because they have something called a BBQ Guru that you can attach to regulate your temperature. The quality of that product is going to be the best you're going to get at home.

### **Got it! Aside from the smoker, what other tools are important?**

**Matthew Register:** The most important thing for at-home barbecue is the instant-read thermometer. Period. If you don't know where your meat is, if it's stalling, then you can't work. You could put hours into a pork shoulder and have it ready to be done, but when you pull it off, it won't be — because it stalled. And a stall would be when you're cooking the meat for a really long time, and it hits a certain temperature, and it just doesn't continue to cook right.

### **What meat should a barbecue beginner attempt to smoke first?**

**Dr. Dana Hanson:** The two things I would cut my teeth on are pork shoulders or pork ribs. Pork spareribs are kind of the showstopper when you have people over, so I would say pork butts or ribs.

**Matthew Register:** I would say chicken because it only takes about an hour to cook. We live in such a microwave world, and barbecue is one of those beautiful things that you can't microwave well. You have to spend a lot of time with a fire. Also, if you ruin chicken, how much money are you going to be out? Maybe nine dollars. So smoke a chicken core, smoke chicken wings, and learn.

### **What's your favorite wood to smoke with, and what should a beginner use?**

**Michael Markham:** Oak is the predominant North Carolina wood, so we'll use oak and mix in a little hickory sometimes. Hickory has its own thing going on; everyone's used to the flavor being in bacon. Mesquite is too much for beginners to start with. If you get commercial charcoal, oak is usually its base foundation so you can't go wrong with it. We usually get our wood from American Wood Yards, right across from the fairgrounds.

**Matthew Register:** I like oak because it's so mellow. You can hit something pretty hard with oak wood and it's not going to be overpowering. For the beginner, I love apple and white oak. I always tell people, especially in this area, if you're cutting down an oak tree, cut it up, split it, and cure it yourself. There are also many box stores that sell chunks — you just have to remember that you want a little bit of moisture in it, you don't want to burn it up really fast.

### **So ... how the heck do we maintain the temperature?**

**Dr. Dana Hanson:** Barbecue is actually doing two things: cooking and smoking. I like to think of them as separate. Cooking is the addition of heat and temperature in a range of 250° to 275° to *create* barbecue. You're kind of dancing this fine line when you're doing good pit barbecue — you want your pit hot enough to give you a good, clean smell, but you want the heat traveling at a distance so it cools off by the time it gets to the meat.

**Matthew Register:** The first thing you need is lots of black coffee [to stay up and focus]. Temperature is one of those aspects where every grill is going to be different. I could go to Jake Wood's [of Lawrence BBQ in Raleigh] and cook on a [Texas-style] Lang Smoker, and it would be different than cooking on my pits. Pits are different because of the change of the metal's thickness and how well it holds. I always tell people, "Don't take off on a grill that you don't know yet." You have to know how hot your pit is going to be if you open up your damper. You learn how to dial up that perfect balance of wind, air, and moisture in the air.

### **Do you have a favorite rub that you rely on?**

**Dr. Dana Hanson:** My dry rub is very simple: cracked black pepper, kosher salt, onion powder, and garlic powder. The ratio of black pepper to kosher salt is one part pepper to three parts salt, all in cups, with a tablespoon of onion powder and a tablespoon of garlic powder.

**Michael Markham:** The main factor you need is a little bit of salt — pork without salt just doesn't taste good at all. If you're pulling from the outside, then the inside is going to have no flavor and the outside will have super intense flavors. That's why we hand-chop everything in one batch. We use our vinegar sauce to chop, but never sweet and tangy sauce because that goes good on brisket and ribs, but not on pork. When we hand-chop, we like to mix all the elements so that it gives you the right amount of salt, pepper, and sweetness, with a little bit of vinegar.

**Matthew Register:** With us, barbecue is very old-school. There are no rubs, no seasoning — just vinegar sauce. That's what traditional eastern North Carolina barbecue is. We wanted to honor that tradition and past.

### **Being a pitmaster is a lofty title! What's the most challenging and most rewarding part of smoking 'cue?**

**Dr. Dana Hanson:** The toughest part about smoking barbecue is learning patience. The most common mistake that beginner barbecue enthusiasts make is that they get too anxious and overzealous. Barbecue is done when barbecue is done — not when people are ready to eat. You can't put a time on it. You have got to be patient and not sweat it when it takes 12 hours to smoke it — even when it took 10 hours the last time.

Sometimes we'll be doing a big cook of briskets, where we get a trailer and put 16 full-packer cut briskets on it over firewood. [Note: *"full packer" refers to how the huge 12- to 18-pound cut is shipped from the packing house, already sliced.*] It's very labor intensive and you feed that firebox a stick of wood every 30 to 40 minutes for 12 hours. It's a big investment of time, but even so, I love the process just as much as I enjoy eating the product. In fact, I do a lot of cooks where I don't eat the end result. I'll take a bite and say, "Yep, that's on point." And I'm happy with it because I've done the process. I know what good brisket tastes like; I've had it plenty of times. I love barbecue, but I also love the process and smoking it.

**Matthew Register:** It's not rocket science. It's not one of those things where we've cracked the code. We're just cooking, so why not share it? A guy isn't going to sit up all night and cook a hog for one sandwich. I love my job because I get to go in and wear shorts, tennis shoes, and a T-shirt; listen to music; and cook barbecue for a living. How cool is that? Are there days when it kills me? Absolutely. But I learned from my grandmother that food is a way to convey love to people. It may be rough, but we get to go and cook for people who line up to eat our food.