

[SLICE OF MIT THEME MUSIC]

**ANNOUNCER:** You're listening to the Slice of MIT Podcast, a production of the MIT Alumni Association.

**JOE MCGONEGAL:** This is the MIT Alumni Books Podcast. I'm Joe McGonagel, Director of Alumni Education. John Shelton Reed, class of '64, is the author of *Barbecue-- a Savor the South cookbook*, published this summer by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Press.

Professor Reed, in your first book *Holy Smoke*, you wrote in the preface that, for better or for worse, barbecue has arrived at a place where people use source as a verb. And there is the reference to craft barbecue Renaissance and so forth. What worries you about the state of barbecue in 2016?

**REED:** Well, a number of things worry me about it, but I'm a worrier. My favorite kind of barbecue is the locally owned, small town, family-owned, really, places that have been around for a few decades and are doing the same thing they've always done and do just the one thing, ideally-- do one thing and do it very well. I could name some places that are like that.

What you're finding now, though, are a number of other kinds of places producing barbecue. You've got, for instance, chain restaurants that appear all around, usually in cities or places without much of a barbecue tradition, but sometimes right in the face of places that have strong barbecue traditions. And they're doing all kinds of barbecues-- I mean, barbecues from everywhere or from nowhere.

Actually, often it's from Kansas City, but I call it the International House of Barbecue model, with all kinds of meats and different kinds of sauces mixed and match. The customer's always right. At the traditional, old-timey barbecue places, the customer is not always right. It's not Burger King. You don't have it your way.

One of my friends, Sam Jones, runs a place down in Ayden, North Carolina. He says, when you come here, it's not what you want; it's how much of it. And I kind of like that attitude and that model.

Another thing, though, that gets to the people that use "source" as a verb, you're starting to find high-toned places. Now, typically, barbecue in the past has been a working man's food. It's been sold at places, actually, that cater to the complete social spectrum. You'll find lawyers

and bankers and schoolteachers and policemen and construction workers all in the same place, but it's been inexpensive-- extremely good, but inexpensive-- food for working men and other people allowed to come and eat it, too.

Now you're getting chefs, people who don't hesitate to call themselves "chefs" in the barbecue business. Barbecue-- sometimes cooks or more often, probably, barbecue men, and they nearly all were men. But now you're getting people who call themselves chefs who talk about sourcing their meat, are serving it with very chef-y touches-- coffee there in the barbecue sauce or nutmeg and stuff like that-- that put their own stamp on it. But that's not how it's been. Barbecue has been a traditional food that changes very slowly, if at all, and that's extremely local.

**MCGONEGAL:** And you would argue, perhaps, that the health of the traditional barbecue industry, as you know it, might mirror the health of the country?

**REED:** Well, there's an old time American thing there with these family-owned, small town small businesses. They're often second, third generation. As I say, they served the whole community.

After the Civil Rights era, they served black and white, as well as rich and poor. It's one place where everybody can come together and eat food that isn't terribly expensive. The new models, they're actually producing very good food, and they're helping to keep the wood cook barbecue tradition alive.

It's threatened. In some places, people are switching to gas or electricity. But it's very good barbecue, but it's not for everybody. It's for people who don't mind paying \$10 for a barbecue sandwich instead of \$3.50.

There's a old-fashioned 4th of July quality to the barbecue I like. It's not cooked by chefs.

**MCGONEGAL:** Talk about North Carolina barbecue and what differentiates it from barbecue in the rest of the country. And how would you map the spread of North Carolina into other states?

**REED:** Well, probably the most quoted thing I've ever written was I wrote once that barbecue in the United States is the closest thing we have to Europe's wines and cheeses. You drive 100 miles and the barbecue changes. There are strong local traditions.

Used to be you could order barbecue. You'd look at it, and you'd know where you are. Within

North Carolina, we have two distinct barbecue traditions and a third emerging one. South Carolina has four.

But what they do in eastern North Carolina is what people did everywhere in the United States in the 19th century. These different traditions have emerged since then. But in 1850, say, barbecue everywhere involved cooking whole hogs, or sometimes sides of beef or whole lambs or sheep.

But hogs are the major source of meat. Whole hogs, cooking them a long time at a low temperature and then serving them with a sauce, if you can call it a sauce. It's really more a tincture. It's a seasoning of vinegar and red pepper and salt, not much else.

And it's not the kind of sauce you get when you go to the grocery store and buy sauce, which is basically ketchup with stuff in it. This is vinegar with stuff in it, and not much. So that's the classic eastern North Carolina barbecue, and that's what American barbecue was before the 1870s.

**MCGONEGAL:** You cite the famous recipe line, "First, shoot the pig."

**REED:** That's right. [LAUGHING] Yeah, there's a cookbook by a very high-toned cookbook writer, giving instructions about how to cook whole hog.

**MCGONEGAL:** But for 200 years or more, that was probably the one recipe direction for a lot of the time.

**REED:** That's right. This is the first step. When you move west across North Carolina, since about 100 years ago, when you get to the middle of the state, ketchup begins to sneak into the sauce. And people are cooking shoulders instead of whole hogs. And we've got a long rap about how the Germans are responsible for that.

**MCGONEGAL:** You've got some great lines in these recipes. Beyond "First, shoot the pig," there's "First, get a goat."

**REED:** [LAUGHING] Yeah.

**MCGONEGAL:** And then if you've got a squirrel or a rabbit, throw it in, too, into the sauce.

**REED:** The squirrels and rabbits are, these days, not the subject of barbecue. But they go into a traditional stew that accompanies barbecue in North Carolina, the Brunswick stew. That's a Virginia/North Carolina thing.

- MCGONEGAL:** I enjoyed the compliments, too. You said one barbecue sauce tastes good on cardboard. It would taste good on cardboard. And another one, you'd put it on ice cream, it tastes so good.
- REED:** That's right. Well, that's when you get out west of the mountains. You start getting these thick, sweet, red sauces that, to my mind, sit on the surface of the meat to disguise the taste of the meat. So if you don't know what you're doing when you're cooking the meat, you can put some of this Kansas City sauce on it, and nobody can tell.
- MCGONEGAL:** You have a recipe for a hill country hot guts in here. You have one for panhandle smoked mullet. Did you have a hard time weeding down the actual recipes you'd include in here and what would you cut out?
- REED:** Yeah. Well, this is in a series of cookbooks, which, oddly enough, have no pictures. But on the other hand, they're-- that's unusual not to have pictures for a cookbook. But they're also reasonably priced, which is unusual, too, partly because they don't have any pictures.
- But it's a stock format, a 5,000 word introduction and then 50 recipes, give or take one or two. I have 51 recipes in this book. I could have put in another 15 or 20.
- Because it's not just barbecue recipes. I also serve recipes for the traditional side dishes. I've got four recipes for coleslaw, for example, different kinds of coleslaw.
- MCGONEGAL:** Your 51st recipe is sweet tea.
- REED:** Yes. That's the very last one. Yeah, you don't need a recipe for beer, which is another thing people often drink with barbecue. But in the Carolinas, especially, sweet tea is the drink of choice, partly because you have these vinegar-based sauces and they get a nice sweet and sour thing going there, but also because a lot of the best barbecue places are run by Baptists, who don't hold with drinking alcohol.
- MCGONEGAL:** You talk about the threats to barbecue. But in your introduction you say right away this is not going to be a book about carne asada, and it's not going to be a book about botany, oh, the international takes on barbecue. This is about Southern barbecue. And I'm curious, as a sociologist, what you make of other cultures adopting the word "barbecue" around the world and putting their spin on it.
- REED:** Virtually every culture has some version of low and slow cooking. I mean, everyone's

discovered that that's a good way to cook tough or gnarly meat, to cook it for a long time at a low temperature. You can braise it, or you can barbecue it, basically. Those are the choices.

Not everybody called it-- not everybody calls it roasting at 200 degrees, 210 degrees for eight to 12 hours. Not everybody calls that barbecuing, but a lot of people do it. Increasingly, in this country especially, Korean restaurants say, well, what we're doing is a lot like barbecue, so we'll call it Korean BBQ.

And I don't mind, as long as it's labeled properly. And in the fullness of time and a few decades, there may be a cross-fertilization going on here. Certainly it's happening in other areas.

**MCGONEGAL:** I'm curious how much-- a lot of your recipes here, you'll say one cup of this, three cups of that-- how much you wing it when you're mixing sauces. It seems like that's an essential part of it, even for those who were made famous on some famous sauces or meats. They're very approximate.

**REED:** Yeah, there's a lot a lot of latitude for sauces and slaws and everything else. And people should be encouraged to experiment. And once you're actually comfortable with it and know what you're doing, you will experiment and you will do things without directly measuring whatnot.

But I've tried to be precise. If you do what the recipe calls for, you'll get a good result. And then after that, you can start fooling around with different proportions and things.

One thing that is really approximate-- and there's nothing to be done about it-- is the time for cooking. If you're cooking a pork shoulder, for example, there are rules of thumb about how long to cook it, but they can be way, way off. What you need to do, as I said in the book, is cook it to a particular internal temperature and try to get to that temperature, cook it to that temperature. And it'll be done.

Now, whether it takes you seven hours or 10 hours to get to that temperature depends on all kinds of things that are not under your control. So start early is the message.

And I've twice now-- I can remember it vividly twice now. I've had people coming to eat barbecue, and it just wasn't done. And it wasn't going to be done for another couple of hours. There's nothing worse than that. It's a horrible, horrible feeling.

**MCGONEGAL:** I'm curious how your MIT education is at work in this book, if at all.

**REED:** [LAUGHING] If at all. Oh, golly. That's a good question. I'm not sure I have an answer. You know, it's been a long time since I went to MIT.

Being at MIT helped me get my job at the University of North Carolina. But I worked there for 30 odd years, and it's been 10 years since I retired. So I spent most of my career in North Carolina writing about the South.

And after I retired, I started writing more about Southern food and increasingly focused on barbecue. But that's just because if you have a pension, you can write about whatever you want to. I wrote another book about New Orleans just because it let me hang out there for a while.

**MCGONEGAL:** I looked up what your major was, what your course was.

**REED:** It's political science. And in those days, you couldn't do just political science. You had to be something serious as well. So I had a degree in political science and mathematics, although I took the easiest math courses I could find.

**MCGONEGAL:** Well, there's some subtle math in this book, you might argue.

**REED:** You could, I guess. Some of those proportions. I tell you what, also, I wound up being a sociologist. I went to Columbia and sociology. There's some sociology in this book, too-- I mean, this business about ethnic influences.

There's a lot of stuff in there about the Germans. I try not to beat people around the head and shoulders with science. But I will say there are things that I notice as a result of my training that other people apparently haven't noticed heretofore, so I'm grateful for that.

**MCGONEGAL:** I can't imagine that when you were at MIT there were any barbecue joints in Boston.

**REED:** As far as I know, there weren't any. If there were, I didn't find them. No, my girlfriend at the time and my wife now was at Duke. And when I went to visit her, there were some good barbecue places in Durham.

**MCGONEGAL:** Let me ask you about my favorite place, Cooper's Pit Barbecue in Texas, central Texas.

**REED:** Llano, Texas.

**MCGONEGAL:** Llano. That's right, yeah.

**REED:** Yeah, they cook in something that they call cowboy barbecue. It's cooked relatively hot, and it's over direct heat. It's kind of like grilling, but it's at a greater distance from the fire. And they're also cooking various cuts of beef as well as pork. It's not classical central Texas barbecue, either, which is heavily influenced by German and Czech butchers. Cooper's is home-on-the-range kind of barbecue, what cowboys would have cooked when they built a fire and put up a frame over it.

**MCGONEGAL:** It was one of my favorite Texas experiences, certainly. Tell me what is on your nightstand right now.

**REED:** Another interest of mine over the years has been the Church of England, which I wrote a book about that, too, which has nothing to do with anything else I've written about. So this summer, my wife and I have been going to a choral festival at Gloucester Cathedral. And we're in London now and checking out various churches that I wrote about in that book from 1996. So I've sort of got the South on hold for the time being.

**MCGONEGAL:** You're reading some of your own writing from the '90s?

**REED:** Well, I'm reading this book I wrote called *Glorious Battle*, which is about the 19th century Church of England. But I've said my last three books were my last ones, and then something too good to pass up came up. And I wound up writing another.

At the moment, there's not another book on the horizon. I'm doing things like essays. When I get annoyed about something, I sit down to write an essay. I'm just doing more and more what I feel like doing.

**MCGONEGAL:** Give alumni a recipe to start with if they've never done traditional barbecue in their backyard. Do you cite the pork shoulder as a good place to start now?

**REED:** Right. Actually, the pork butt, Boston butt, which is half of the-- it's the top half of a pork shoulder. It's five to eight pounds. It's a good, modest size.

As I said in the book, it's a very forgiving cut. It's impossible, really, to overcook it. It's self-basting.

You don't have to worry too much about it getting dry because it's so fatty to start with. It's a

very good place to start and not a bad place, as I said, to stop. Because an awful lot of barbecue places around the country are serving pulled pork, and that's typically coming from pork shoulder, often just from Boston butt.

**MCGONEGAL:** Don Shelton Reed, class of '64, is the author of *Barbecue-- a Savor the South cookbook*, published this summer by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Press. John Shelton Reed, class of '64, thanks for joining me.

**REED:** It's been my pleasure, and hello to all my classmates.

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