

Go Slow: Present and Future Legends of BBQ

by Nancy Barber

Long before the Italians went on their Slow Food crusade, black slaves from the Caribbean introduced Southerners to that most quintessential of American slow foods: BBQ. It tantalized the European settlers and eventually spread from its rural Southern roots all across the country, diversifying in different parts of the South and Midwest. Its popularity continues to grow, and now even children are learning to master the pit.

"See, the thing is, BBQ is slow, and everything in this world today is so fast," says national BBQ ambassador Jim Tabb. "You want to hurry up this computer, you want to hurry up this, faster and faster and faster, and pretty soon, by Friday, you're worn out from all this speed and all this haste. There's one thing left: BBQ, and you're not going to speed it up or it won't be any good."

Tabb, a Tryon, NC, resident, has been the primary mentor for the Future Legends of BBQ (FLB) contest, one of the few kids-only BBQ competitions in the country that is not associated with an adult competition. The Second Annual FLB, a benefit for the Henderson County Young Leaders Program, was held on October 9, 2010, at Camp Greystone in Tuxedo, NC. Fifteen teams and about 60 children participated in this year's event.

The FLB isn't the first BBQ contest Jim Tabb has helped foster. He got his BBQ start as a Navy fighter pilot in the 1950's when he was stationed in Jacksonville, FL. He and four other pilots used to frequent a local BBQ joint until they got the bright idea that they should make their own, so they bought a little grill for the backyard. "We thought we were BBQing," remembers

Tabb. "We were actually grilling." The difference, he explains, is in the temperature. BBQing is smoking the meat at a temperature between 180-300 degrees. Anything hotter than that is "grilling."

The "grilling" eventually led to Tabb's first BBQ competition: "We challenged another fighter squadron. We said, 'We can cook better BBQ than you can,' and they said, 'No you can't,'" and so a great BBQ competitor was born.

After ten years of flying in the Navy, Tabb flew internationally with TWA for almost thirty years, honing his foodie skills. "Pilots usually bid for days off or certain cities they want to go to," explained Tabb. "I always bid food. If I felt like I needed some German food, I'd bid Frankfurt; if I needed some feta cheese, I'd bid Athens; Good olive oil? I'd bid Italy." Despite all the great international cuisine Tabb dined on, he always came back to his American roots and his first love: BBQ.

Tabb got better and better at BBQing and competed around the country with great success, including a first place in the famed American Royal Invitational contest in Kansas City. He quickly rose in the ranks of BBQ judges as well, and eventually became Julia Child's friend and personal BBQ guru.

His relationship with Child got started when Tabb was in the Keys cooking at a fishing tournament for his friend, the late celebrity butcher Merle Ellis, who himself was friends with Child. Child was in Miami, and Ellis invited her down to try some BBQ. "I had my head stuck under a cooker," said Tabb, "and she walked up behind me and said, 'What are you doing?' I said, 'Well, I'm BBQing.' She said, 'Let me have a little bit of that.' She reached in. She was a great one at that—just picking food. She took a bite and said, 'That's the best stuff I ever put in my mouth. That's really good!' She walked off about 10 or 20 feet, and she did a 180 and her entourage all turned around behind her, and she said, 'Would you come to dinner with me tonight?' That's like Jesus asking me to go to church! I said, 'I'd be glad to, but I'm pretty dirty.' She said, 'We'll put you at the end of the table.'"

Tabb ended up sitting right next to Child and they became fast friends, "cross-plating" (taking bites of each other's food) and talking about cooking. Tabb would eventually cook BBQ as a fund-raiser for Child's foundation at a number of International Association for Culinary Professionals (IACP) conventions.

In 1994, Tabb help found the Blue Ridge Barbecue Festival and put his hometown, Tryon, NC, on the map as a BBQ Mecca. People come from all over the country to compete in it.

Most recently Tabb has turned to helping Starr Teel, owner of Hubba Hubba BBQ in Flat Rock, NC, build up the Future Legends of BBQ Competition. "Starr had this idea," said Tabb, "but he didn't know how to start it out. I said, well, let's talk about the people I know who are in the business presently. If you're going to teach acting, you'd like to bring in

a movie actor. You go out and get Mike Mills if you wanna teach BBQ."

Mills is the owner of 17th Street Bar and Grill in Murphysboro, IL, and Memphis Championship BBQ in Las Vegas. He and his Apple City Barbecue team competed all over the country in BBQ contests, winning the World Championship four times and the Grand World Championship three times. He even started his own BBQ contest called the Murphysboro BBQ Cook-Off. When Bill Clinton was President, Mike had a top secret security clearance to board Air Force One whenever the former President got a hankering for BBQ. Mills has also been featured on the Food Network, Travel Channel, Regis and Kathy Lee, and CBS This Morning.

He and his daughter, Amy Mills Tunnicliffe, co-wrote an award-winning book called *Peace, Love, and Barbecue: Recipes, Secrets, Tall Tales, and Outright Lies from the Legends of Barbecue*. It's no wonder Mills is affectionately known as "The Legend." Jim Tabb enlisted "The Legend" to help promote the first Future Legends of BBQ Competition in 2009, and Mills was back in 2010 for the second contest as well, teaching a BBQ ribs class, signing books, and generously handing out advice to anyone who asked. Mills has been amazed at the quality of the BBQ these kids are cooking. "It's awesome," he said. "I was pleasantly surprised. I don't know what I expected."

Mills attributes the rise in cooking interest among children in part to the Food Network: "The number of young kids that are fixated on the Food Network—it's unbelievable! All the way from three and four and five and six-year-olds, on up are watching Food Network like you wouldn't believe."

"It's the only way they get educated in food today," added Tabb, "because their parents are working or don't have time to mess with them or they take them to Burger King."

Whatever the reason, "Kids Q's," as they are known, have sprung up all over the country, but according to Kansas City Barbecue Society Executive Director Carolyn Wells, most of those Kids Q's are associated with adult BBQ contests, not standing on their own like the Future Legends of BBQ.

Kids teams from all over Western NC showed up early on a beautiful fall Saturday to finish setting up cookers and decorating their stations in celebration of team names such as Kung Fu BBQ, Smokin' Clovers, Barbie-Q-Army, Groovy Chicks, Holy Smokers (from the Immaculate Catholic School), and A Little Pit of Heaven (from Fruitland Baptist Church).

Teel, the founder of the event, talked about his twin goals of bringing more children into the camp experience through the Henderson County Young Leaders Program and bringing more children into the BBQ experience through this contest. According to Teel, both the camping community and the BBQ communities consist of "tribes."

"From the outside looking in," said Teel, "camp seems to be about experiences. At the end of the day, you see the blobs and the pools and the ropes and the boats, but what camps ultimately do is build community and build success in children's lives through community."

"This is totally consistent with what we're doing in the BBQ experience. You go out on a Friday evening, and everybody's setting up and getting ready. The children are the central feature, but the entire family can participate. Within that community, the resourcefulness, the competence, and the confidence that comes from mastering the whole BBQ smoke experience is empowering. That's the intersection between camp and BBQ."

This year's Future Legends of BBQ winner was the same as last year's, 14-year-old Colton Jones. Colton grew up tagging along with his dad, Scott Colton, to BBQ competitions. The elder Jones thinks the kids Q's are so important because the great names in BBQ won't last forever: "Eventually that flame is gonna die out and that page is gonna turn, and there's gonna have to be someone to follow through. I just think exposing these kids and teaching them the right way to do it is a fantastic thing."

Asked what he liked about competing, Colton said, "I like the vibe, the feel of it, and the community. Everybody's so nice. I just love the people who do it." Colton acknowledges, however, that it takes "a lot of patiently waiting."

Colton's dad agrees. "He's usually the hurry-up-I'm-ready-to-eat kind of guy, except for today."

Jim Tabb's ideas about American slow food are catching on, one young pitmaster at a time.



Jim Tabb



Future Legends of BBQ



Tommy Houston, Mike Mills, Starr Teel & Jim Tabb