

Introduction to the Second Edition

Many years ago, I began to write about my favorite country cooking places in my weekly newspaper column. My readers liked those columns better than my usual ones about politics and books. When I invited them to write about their favorite local haunts, I got enough material for more columns and for a series of magazine articles that featured local eateries near the interstates. All that led to the publication of the first edition of *Roadside Eateries* in 2016.

Writing about these treasured eateries and assembling them into a timely book present a special challenge. These places do not last forever. They go out of business, or change ownership, or keep chugging until they just run their natural course. It is sad to see them go, but there is also great joy in seeking and finding new and welcoming places to get sweet tea. I love stopping at little diners that serve hushpuppies you never forget, meeting good folks, and watching people settle political differences over a slice of lemon pie. Sometimes I think I have seen and tasted nearly everything, but there will always be more. I love this state and love traveling its roads, finding even more special places and reporting back to you in this second edition.

In this edition, I have added about 30 new eateries. That's the good news.

The sad news, though, is the closure of some of my favorites, including several long-standing and beloved barbecue restaurants that closed their doors.

One was Wilber's, the iconic barbecue restaurant in Goldsboro, home of some of the best Eastern-style North Carolina barbecue. There are plans to reopen this classic place, and I have my fingers crossed. In the meantime I have added nearby McCall's Bar-B-Que & Seafood, which has earned praises, even from some Wilber's loyalists.

Bill's Barbecue near I-95 in Wilson closed after more than 55 years in business. Its founder, Bill Ellis, retired in 2015 and died in 2017. Even when Bill's 850 seats were full, visiting its bountiful buffet was like a warm family meal. To fill this void, I have included Marty's, owned by Bill's son Lawrence, which gets great reviews from the people who loved his dad's offerings.

Allen & Son Barbecue near I-40 and I-85 north of Chapel Hill shut its doors. For many years, owner Keith Allen worked early and late to chop the hickory wood and manage the slow-cooked fire that brought pork shoulders to perfect eating condition. In its place, I have added Allen & Son Bar-B-Que. It is still open and thriving between Pittsboro and Chapel Hill on 15-501.

Carolina Bar-B-Q in Statesville, made famous by Charles Kuralt's cheerful criticism of the lean pork shoulder barbecue that lacked the fat and gristle he loved in whole hog 'cue, has also closed. Happily, that site is now occupied by Randy's BBQ, a worthy successor, one that Kuralt would enjoy and praise.

Nunnery-Freeman Barbecue in Henderson was where one of the best alternatives to wood-fired cooking was developed.

Fuller's Old Fashioned Bar-B-Q in Lumberton was swept away by the floods that followed Hurricane Matthew. It has moved its operations to nearby Pembroke, taking the location of another one of my favorites, the now closed Sheff's Seafood, where I enjoyed great meals and fellowship when I worked at UNC-Pembroke a few years ago.

Similarly, the Lantern, one of my favorites in Dodson, closed several years ago. Thankfully, Noel and Julie Easter have moved their Central Cafe to the Lantern location, bringing good meat-and-vegetable-plate options much like the Lantern.

I have tried to follow the pattern set in the first edition by selecting restaurants that were local institutions and close enough to an interstate highway to be conveniently accessible to a traveler. I have to confess that some of my selections are farther away from the highway than what you've seen before in *Roadside Eateries*, but in every case I believe the experience will be worth the extra miles.

In the coming months and years, I will be following the stories of the restaurants included in this edition, hoping they last forever but knowing that there will be changes and losses. I will have my eyes out for places I have missed and for those that will earn a place in any new edition. If you have suggestions, comments, or criticism, it would be great to hear from you at nceateries@yahoo.com.

But, before we get into the great restaurants in this book—new and old—you might ask, "D. G., just where did you learn that local restaurants are where you find real friends and lifelong memories?"

Maybe it was my North Mecklenburg High School football teammate Tommy Oehler who got me started when he introduced me to his dad, J. W., and the wonders of the annual Mallard Creek Church barbecue, which the Oehler family still manages every October north of Charlotte. There is no better example of how good barbecue and a host of friendly people make a meal into something memorable.

My whole life, to this day, I've been on the lookout for places where I can find the Mallard Creek feeling. The places I've found that live up to Mallard Creek, at least in my

mind—the restaurants that are about food, friends, and more—are the places you’ll find in this book. So when I’m asked just where I learned that local restaurants are where you find real friends and lifelong memories, I suppose my answer would be: North Carolina. I have a lifetime’s worth of memories about the food and friendship in this state, and they led me to write this book.

When I moved to Chapel Hill to work for the late University of North Carolina System president Dick Spangler, he introduced me to Breadmen’s, where the great and bountiful servings of solid food and the ever presence of policemen and community leaders made it my second home until my wife joined me in Chapel Hill. Now, she and I take our grandchildren there and spoil them with pancakes and french fries while we still split the giant vegetable plate, almost always choosing their tasty banana pudding, which Breadmen’s includes as one of the veggie options—even though everybody knows it’s not a vegetable. But I wanted to know about other country cooking places. Jack Hunt, a powerful legislator from Cleveland County, was married to a cousin of President Spangler, who told me I could go to Jack if I ever needed help in my work with the legislature. So one day I did ask him for help: “Where is the best place to get country cooking around here?”

He paused, squinted, smiled a little bit, and finally said, “Well, the truth is there is nothing better, I think, than Ruby’s cooking.” His wife, Spangler’s cousin, was the Ruby in question. Jack and Ruby regularly invited their government friends for informal suppers of country ham, baked chicken, cornbread, biscuits with sourwood honey and molasses, and vegetables from her garden, including corn frozen minutes after it was picked the previous summer. There were always desserts of homemade cakes and pies. Of course, there was also the opportunity to make friends with governors, Supreme Court justices, and legislative leaders.

Once, when President Spangler and Governor Jim Hunt were at loggerheads about the governor’s budget proposals for the university, they could hardly speak to each other until Jack invited them to breakfast with Ruby. Neither the governor nor the university president could say no to Ruby. It was only after they sat down to Ruby’s cooking and warm spirit that they worked out a compromise.

Some of the other lobbyists had resources to entertain legislators at fancy and expensive restaurants. I had no expense account. But I found that I could always get wonderful and inexpensive country cooking and run into important legislators at places such as Big Daddy’s and Finch’s, where the food was great, the servers were friendly, and the atmosphere was warm and inclusive enough to be conducive to building trust.

On one occasion, university vice president Bill McCoy and I left from Chapel Hill about noon, driving to Cullowhee for a meeting at Western Carolina University. By the time we were approaching Winston-Salem on I-40, McCoy said he was getting hungry for a barbecue sandwich. I quickly agreed but admitted that I did not know where there was a good place to stop. We called the law offices of the late Ham Horton, then serving in the legislature and a well-known food fan. Horton was unavailable, his receptionist told us, because he was in an important real estate closing.

“Tell him we only need him for a minute because we need a place to eat,” we pled. Thankfully, Horton came to the phone and quickly gave us a recommendation and directions.

At that moment I knew that interstate travelers needed some sort of guidebook to the barbecue joints and country cooking places where the locals eat. I began to write about my favorite country cooking places in my weekly newspaper column. My readers like those columns better than my usual ones about politics and books. When I invited them to write about their favorite places, I got enough material for more columns and for a series of magazine articles that featured some of my favorites.

I left the university in the fall of 1997 to run for the U.S. Senate. After I was soundly defeated in the primary by John Edwards, Chancellor Joseph Oxendine at UNC-Pembroke asked me to work for him for 6 months. While I was there, he introduced me to Lumbee Indian culture and two of his favorite restaurants: Linda’s, where the lunchtime crowd of locals politely welcomed the “university crowd” to join them for lunch, and Shef’s, where the seafood suppers drew people from all over Lumbee Land.

A few months after that assignment ended, North Carolina Central University chancellor Julius Chambers asked me to work for him for a few months. I enjoyed eating with my staff at the faculty cafeteria; it was not a regular restaurant, of course, but the country food was delicious. One day the special plate was pigs’ feet. I remember how everybody looked over to see how I was going to deal with that dish. I pretended that I did not notice their looks and cleaned my plate and ate all the meat and tasty fat from every toe.

Folks at Central introduced me to Dillard’s, where people from all over Durham gathered to enjoy barbecue with a mustard-based sauce more like they serve in South Carolina. Sadly, Dillard’s closed a few years ago. While in Durham, I met some of my Central staff at Bullock’s Bar-B-Cue in Durham, described later in this book.

Meanwhile, another interim job with the Trust for Public Land took me back to Charlotte for more than a year. I introduced my staff to the Open Kitchen, which was

the same as it was so many years earlier. They introduced me to Lupie's Cafe, where we gathered for simple but tasty fare and the chance to meet people from all over town. Both these great places are described in this book. Unfortunately, another of my Charlotte favorites, Anderson's, home of the World's Best Pecan Pie and where I spent many happy mornings at business, political, church, and social gatherings, closed a few years ago.

But that is the challenge of writing about restaurants: they have a lifespan. They come, they go. But part of the joy in all these jobs I've had over the years and all the traveling I've done is finding new and welcoming places to pull up, grab a seat, and talk with good folks while eating wonderful North Carolina home cooking.

I've written for years about these places and published books and countless columns about them and the people in them. I hope you enjoy what's ahead in this book and that it inspires you to go a little out of your way to find something special, where the folks will likely greet you like an old friend, even if it's your first visit.