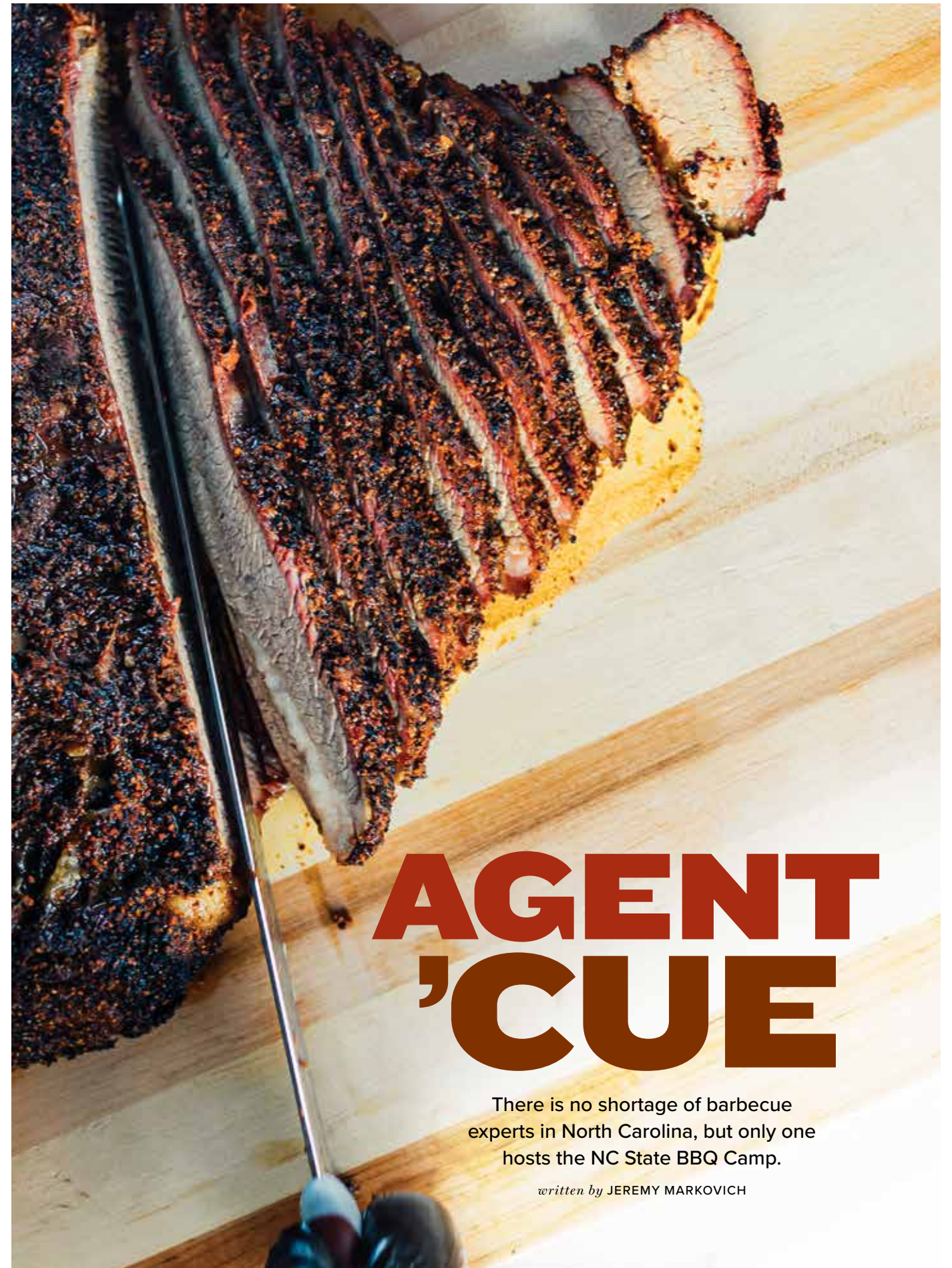


Kevin Peterson, who, with his wife, Dana, owns Showtime's Legit BBQ in Benson, checks the temperature of hogs cooking in a mobile pit. Opposite: the Petersons' award-winning brisket.



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# AGENT 'CUE

There is no shortage of barbecue experts in North Carolina, but only one hosts the NC State BBQ Camp.

*written by* JEREMY MARKOVICH



Kevin and Dana Peterson are two-time state barbecue champions and teach the whole-hog portion of BBQ Camp. For the annual meeting of the North Carolina Meat Processors Association, they brought their mobile pit and smoker — and lots and lots of brisket.



**W**HENEVER SOMEONE COOKS barbecue in the open for a lot of people, That Guy is inevitably going to show up. That Guy usually asks a lot of questions. *What kind of smoker is this? What kind of wood are you using? How long has the pig been on?* He lingers just a little bit too long and stares just a little bit too hard. But his aim is true: That Guy (and it's usually a guy) earnestly wants to know all there is to know about barbecue.

This evening, That Guy is a 30-something man in flip-flops and shorts with a cheap beer in his hand and a lot of inquiries on his mind. He's a little bit of a barbecue insider — he works for a company that makes machines that pull meat off the bone. "I love barbecue," he says. He wants to know how to season the pork. The best techniques for pulling it apart. Time. Temperature. He's been trying to smoke all sorts of cuts of meat lately. Boston butts, especially. When That Guy sees someone with a legit setup, he can't help himself. "You learn new tricks," he says.

Unbeknownst to That Guy, there's an expert lurking in his midst.

"I'm the meat guy," Dr. Dana Hanson says, and that's an easy summation of his longer title. He's an NC State Extension meat science specialist, and since 2016, he's been catering to That Guy (and, increasingly, That Gal). Every June, Hanson, with support from members of the North Carolina Meat Processors Association, and others hold the NC State BBQ Camp on campus in Raleigh. "I'm not the originator of doing an 'academic' school of barbecue," he says. He'd attended Camp Brisket at

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Texas A&M University and, together with a graduate student, adapted it for a North Carolina audience. Or so he thought. Since it began, the camp has attracted people from California to New York.

Maybe it's because North Carolina barbecue has gone from a regional delicacy to a nationally known commodity, now playing in the same league as barbecue from Texas and Kansas City. Fans are loyal to specific styles in the same way that sports fans are loyal to their teams. Hanson has thought about that. "It's fun," he says. "You can have a conversation about barbecue with anybody." In an era when disagreements can turn toxic, barbecue is a conversation starter where, yes, you can agree to disagree. "I don't know many people who are ready to take up fisticuffs over it," he says. It's a safe space to fight.

## Barbecue is a conversation starter where, yes, you can agree to disagree.

And so, while Hanson's barbecue camp doesn't play favorites between eastern- and Lexington-style — or even Texas and Kansas City — it does try to introduce campers to all different types of barbecue, including things like turkey, spare ribs, and pork butts. "It's more of a 50,000-foot view of barbecue as a whole," he says.

There's a lot of interest lately in whole-hog barbecue. The camp has added it to the curriculum, but cooking whole hogs takes time, expertise, and practice. "Whole hog is a bigger study," Hanson says. By the time you cook one, "hopefully you've had wins and losses already. If you spend \$300 on a whole hog and it turns into garbage, you're pretty discouraged."

**YOU ARE NOT GOING TO BECOME AN EXPERT, EVEN** after two jam-packed days at BBQ Camp. It's hard to come up with an itinerary that serves everyone, Hanson says, because some attendees are award-winning pitmasters, and some are newbies who haven't even used the shiny new smoker they just bought. Instead, the camp is a hands-on attempt to get people interested in the parts of barbecue that are important but don't get the headlines: Sanitation. Proper food handling. Temperature. The supply chains for meat. How different cuts are processed. "It doesn't get real heady," Hanson says. Sure, you'll learn about how to slow-cook pork shoulders over hickory coals for hours on end. But you'll also learn how to use your smoker at home.

Which, for a method of cooking food that seems to have a puritanical streak, might feel a little wrong. It felt that way for Hanson. At first. "When the Traeger first came out, I thought it was blasphemy," Hanson says of the popular wood pellet-fired grill and smoker that you can control with an app on your phone. That ease ran afoul of the toil that many people think has to be a component of good barbecue. Since then, Hanson says, he's mellowed with age,

**Dana Hanson teaches would-be pitmasters and backyard grill masters how to properly prepare and serve a variety of meats during BBQ Camp. One recommendation: Sweet corn pairs perfectly with any style of 'cue.**

## Agriculture is underappreciated, but it's still one of North Carolina's top industries.

Last year, Chris Moore (below), who runs the Moore Than You Can Chew food truck in Raleigh, was one of many campers with experience cooking low and slow, while some novice participants got their first real taste of hardwood smoke and spicy rub.

and he's seen the benefit that new and affordable equipment has had over the past decade.

"If you have a tool that matches your level of commitment, use it," he says. "There's a continuum. If I'm cooking during the week? I hit the switch and use the Traeger. If I'm cooking for more people, I use the Big Green Egg. If I'm doing a big catered event, I've got a grill that's a trailer that burns firewood. I can do 16 briskets on it."

In other words, Hanson and his fellow instructors meet campers where they are. As a fifth-generation farmer from Wisconsin, he looks at it this way: Agriculture and all of those in the supply chain are underappreciated. But in North Carolina, agriculture and agribusiness are still among the top industries. The state, for all of its growth and its rising urban centers, is still more rural than many of its peers. "I'm using barbecue as a platform to teach other things that are important," Hanson says about cooking, but also about farming.

Above all, the camp can come off like a pep rally, which is evident from the number of BBQ Camp alums hanging out in this concrete business park in Charlotte. Dana Peterson from Showtime's Legit BBQ in Benson taught at last year's camp. "They wanted to learn," she says of her students, including a few who already knew a lot about how

to prepare meat. "When we first piloted the camp, I hadn't mastered the brisket," says Kurt Byrd of Smithfield-based Carolina Packers, makers of the well-known red hot dogs. The camp gave him the inspiration to get better, because even though he's an industry insider, he doesn't always have time to mess around with a charcoal smoker.

BBQ Camp, he says, is "a break from routine. I get to come here and learn to barbecue." One of Byrd's plant managers got so inspired by the camp that he kept learning and practicing and eventually bought his own food trailer. Sure, you can learn a lot from YouTube, Byrd says, but it's not the same as being able to ask experts questions face-to-face.

Part of the NC State BBQ Camp's success comes from Hanson's connections in the industry, Byrd says, and that's on display here. Hanson feels omnipresent among the plastic tables and the crowd going back for seconds of corn, slaw, brisket, and beans. In fact, one of the only people he hasn't met is That Guy, who's still hanging out near the smoker. Perhaps they'll cross paths in line for dessert — or maybe this summer at camp. **Os**

*Jeremy Markovich is the communications director for the Program for Leadership and Character at Wake Forest University.*

**To learn more about the NC State BBQ Camp, visit [go.ncsu.edu/ncstatebbqcamp](http://go.ncsu.edu/ncstatebbqcamp).**



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