

BBQ&A: Lolis Eric Elie, Writer and Filmmaker

Posted at BBQJew.com on March 17, 2010 by Porky LeSwine



America's least successful vegetarian?

When it comes to barbecue, [Lolis Eric Elie](#) has a checkered past. It's not that he wrote a three times weekly column for The Times-Picayune of New Orleans from 1995 to 2009. Or that he is on the staff of the new David Simon series, [Treme](#), which debuts on HBO in April and has nothing to do with 'cue. It's certainly not that he has edited and authored two essential books about barbecue, [Corn Bread Nation Vol. 2: The United States of Barbecue](#) and [Smokestack Lightning](#), respectively. Nor that he has produced two documentary films, including [Smokestack Lightning: A Day in the Life of Barbecue](#). None of these parts of Elie's bio concern me. His checkered past? He once admitted to going through a vegetarian phase.

Despite his past vegetable transgressions, Elie's extensive barbecue background makes him the perfect subject for an interview. In the spirit of carnivores everywhere, Elie was kind enough to chew the fat with me on a variety of subjects. In the below interview, we discuss the "disturbing trend" of North Carolina barbecue joints switching to gas/electric cooking, why—ahem—New York barbecue has its advantages, and the newspaper industry's slow "suicide," among other topics. Dig in...

BBQ Jew: I understand you were raised in Louisiana. When and how did a po' boy-beignet-and-gumbo-eating New Orleaner like yourself discover barbecue? Seriously, Louisiana isn't widely known for its BBQ, so what was your introduction to barbecue and how did you decide it was worth writing a book about?

Lolis Eric Elie: I was on the road with [Frank Stewart, the photographer](#), and we were working for Wynton Marsalis. Frank grew up in Memphis and Chicago and he came up with the idea of doing a book on barbecue. Growing up in Louisiana, I had some great backyard barbecue. But there were certainly no commercial establishments to rival the best of Memphis or Kansas City. Our initial book proposal was a pretty light romp through the world of barbecue that would compare and contrast the

various styles. After a week in Memphis, researching the sample chapter, I knew that barbecue could be the focus of a serious book about American culture.

BBQ Jew: Since Smokestack Lightning was first published in 1996, barbecue has gained far more mainstream attention across the U.S. and beyond. In fact, it's probably one of the hottest American food trends, from the lowly McRib on up to fine dining establishments. How do you feel about barbecue's newfound status?

LEL: The growth of barbecue is a mixed blessing. If the big money restauranteurs did not find it worth investing in, the art form might all but die. Mom and Pop restaurants are dying in droves for a variety of reasons. But the emergence of barbecue in, say, a media capital like New York helps keep us on the radar of the major media in a way that we couldn't be if, for example, Dreamland in Tuscaloosa, AL was the capital of the barbecue world.

And, I tell you something else. While we might argue about the quality of barbecue in New York (I'll say it's good and getting better by leaps and bounds) one thing it has head and shoulders above everywhere else. They actually cook their side dishes and use fresh ingredients while most folks in barbecue country are opening up cans. It's always been funny to me to hear a guy go on for hours about how he uses only a certain kind of wood and how nobody but his oldest son knows his sauce recipe. What he won't tell you is that Campbell's Soup Co. and Sysco have the recipes for everything else he serves.

BBQ Jew: Reading [your online bio](#) I couldn't help but notice some irony in your two Master's degrees: one in Journalism from Columbia University and one in Creative Writing from the University of Virginia. How has your education—which would seem to give you an equal ability to report the truth and to tell lies—influenced your writing?

LEL: The important thing, whether telling truth or lying, is story. How do you keep the readers interest? Journalists have been borrowing techniques from novelists since at least the "new journalism." If I can interest you in my story, I can get you to sit long enough to understand it.

BBQ Jew: In Smokestack Lightning you fess up to experiencing a low period in your life when you gave up meat "under the blinding influence of a vegetarian seductress." Have you had any vegetarian relapses you need to share to ease your mind?

LEL: The most important revelation of late in that regard is [Pollan's Law](#), or that's what I call it: "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly vegetables." There is very little that I won't eat. But every meal doesn't have meat, let alone barbecue. I try to eat moderately so the doctor won't demand that I do so.

BBQ Jew: Your career as a columnist for the Times-Picayune, which ended with you accepting a buyout in December, began around the same time Smokestack Lightning was first published. Did you learn anything from researching and writing Smokestack Lightning that helped you as a journalist?

LEL: Smokestack reminded me of the importance of culture and colloquial culture in particular. I am always on the lookout, as a writer, for examining those aspects of culture that are not being played on the big stage. It felt so, so good to "discover" some barbecue guys who were not well known in their home city. I looked for those kinds of people when I wrote the column.

BBQ Jew: Speaking of journalism, I'd be remiss to not ask you that pesky question that I am almost duty-bound to ask of a newspaper man: Is print journalism dying and, if so, what's the cure?

LEL: When the Saints won the Super Bowl, they reprinted the paper two or three times, such was the demand. When you really want a moment you want hard copy, not a web page. Still, I think newspapers are committing suicide rather than dying off. They are rushing to keep ahead of the internet

surge without fully evaluating what they can do to compete. I don't think print is dying. I just think they are floundering for response to the internet.

BBQ Jew: As an aside, I notice you are a writer for the new David Simon show, "Treme," which is set in New Orleans. David Simon is rightfully famous for his acclaimed series, "The Wire." How did you get connected with his new project? How has the experience been thus far?

LEL: David Simon is a student of place. When he and Eric Overmyer decided to set their new show in New Orleans, they wanted our culture to be front and center. So the main characters all have something to do with the music. The show is about the kinds of people and subjects I've been writing about for years, so it feels good. I think TV audiences will be pleasantly shocked at a New Orleans that is interesting, but not nearly as weird as what usually gets shown on television.

BBQ Jew: As a North Carolina native, I was pleased to read in the introduction to Smokestack Lightning that the idea for the book developed over a barbecue meal in Wilson, NC. Since North Carolina has the longest continuous BBQ tradition in the country, this strikes me as divine intervention or at least a simple twist of fate. You also write that cooking whole hog barbecue is arguably "the most difficult technique for the barbecue cook to master." Is it safe to assume you have a great deal of respect for the traditional art of whole hog barbecue as practiced in Eastern North Carolina?

LEL: I wish that respect was more evident in the book. But, by the time we got to North Carolina, we were tired and running out of money. I love some of the bbq I ate there. Had great food at Lexington #1 for example. But the Carolinas, North and South, have a problem: based on my experience, it seems there are far more gas and electric pits there than in other parts of barbecue country. That's a disturbing trend that needs to be reversed.

BBQ Jew: Unfortunately, you are right about the state of NC barbecue. There are probably no more than a few dozen joints left here that still cook in pits fueled all by wood. Leaving this sad subject aside, as someone who didn't grow up on the stuff what did you think of *the taste* of North Carolina barbecue?

LEL: When a pair of television reporters clued me in to asking for the "outside meat," that made all the difference. All of the rich smoke and salt flavors are that much more intense. But, speaking more generally, North Carolina exemplified for me the problem of critiquing the barbecue of another region. I went to dozens of places, had plenty of bad food. But, in searching for the best, I came to love the barbecue of all the regions. The thin, vinegar sauce, or the Worcestershire sauce you get in part of the state were foreign to me. I didn't especially like them at first. But I came to love them. I have never particularly liked cole slaw. But the vinegar based North Carolina version converted me. And putting it right on the sandwich is perfection itself.

When I visited the state later to do the documentary based on the book, I discovered [Keith Allen in Chapel Hill](#). His food, the meat, the pies, everything exemplified the old fashioned, made-from-scratch flavor and ethos I most admire.

BBQ Jew: You write in Smokestack Lightning, "We know that barbecue is a metaphor for American culture in a broad sense, and that it is a more appropriate metaphor than any other American food." What does this metaphor say about our culture? Has the metaphor changed over the years along with the barbecue?

LEL: The metaphor works because barbecue mirrors the geographic, cultural, racial, ethnic and international dimensions of our county. Any Americans who have been here long enough or in a sufficiently sizeable population can see their image reflected in this food. For example, go to the cook book aisle at Barnes and Noble and see how many references to Jamaican jerk you see in bbq books. Or how many recipes call for Teriyaki sauce or soy sauce.

As for the metaphor changing, the metaphor works because it is flexible in the ways indicated above. Barbecue also reflects the combination of tradition and modernity that reflect that pace and nature of cultural change in America.

BBQ Jew: Are there any other foods that come close to barbecue in terms of being a metaphor for American culture?

LEL: None. There are two things that set barbecue apart. 1) It is served virtually from coast to coast (though not necessarily in every state). 2) Several states, regions and sub-regions each claim barbecue as their signature food and have their own local version on it. No other food meets both criteria.

BBQ Jew: On to less profound subjects. If you had to be randomly dropped into a state for your last barbecue meal, and had to eat at the closest BBQ joint to your random landing site, which state would you choose and why?

LEL: No question about it, though I hate to admit it. It'd be Texas. There is less bad barbecue in Texas than anywhere else.

BBQ Jew: Okay, in this next scenario you won't be randomly dropped in a state so you can choose where to go. What's your favorite BBQ joint and why? And what would you order there if you could only visit one last time?

LEL: Cozy Corner in Memphis. I love their ribs. They have a sliced beef brisket sandwich they serve with raw onion and "slaw dressing" which is not on the menu, but which is divine. Their smoked Cornish game hens are wonderful. But, perhaps more than all of that, some of my fondest memories from being on the road doing the book took place there. The drag with Cozy Corner and almost all of the traditional Southern barbecue places (with the exception of Hinze's in Texas) is that the sides are not homemade. For that, you need to go to (believe it or not) Blue Smoke in New York, NY.

BBQ Jew: How many servings of barbecue do you think you ate while researching Smokestack Lightning? Did Wynton Marsalis ever join you for a meal?

LEL: Wynton was on a different itinerary than we were while we were doing the book. Never ate with him during the research. The problem with answering the first part of your question is that on our scouting days, Frank and I would go to six or eight restaurants, order conservatively, then decide if we wanted to order more or come back. Is that considered a serving? Many times we took one bite each and walked away.

BBQ Jew: You write in Smokestack Lightning that barbecue is an endangered, dying art but that there are also signs of hope. Returning once more to cheap New Orleans stereotypes for this final question, please pull out your tarot cards and a crystal ball. What do you predict lies in store for the future of barbecue?

LEL: The good and terrible thing is that the professional restaurateurs with their money have discovered barbecue as a potentially profitable thing. Some of them are trying to actually do good barbecue. As long as that is the case, barbecue will still exist. There are even chains like [Jim 'N Nicks](#) out of Alabama that are doing good food. Also, the competition circuit is like a conservatory of barbecue. You have all these people with nothing more important to do than to cook the perfect shoulder. They are not all good, that's for sure. But it means that much of the tradition remains. So I am hopeful, despite the competition from McDonald's and Tony Roma's!

BBQ Jew: Thank you, and let's hope the forces of good (and wood) prevail.