

BBQ&A: James Villas, Writer and Cookbook Author

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A self-described "Southerner by birth and temperament and appetite," James Villas has given the people of his native North Carolina many reasons to be proud over the years. His latest



cookbook, [*Pig: King of the Southern Table*](#), is perhaps the most significant reason yet. Tarheels and tarheels at heart will be wowed by *Pig's* wide-ranging collection of recipes, which describe how to cook every part of the pig one could ever imagine wanting to eat (and then some).

Long before penning his culinary ode to North Carolina's favorite animal, Villas received his PhD in Romance Languages and Comparative Literature and served a stint as a university professor. Soon he left academia to follow his heart/stomach (they are one and the same after all) into the world of food writing. Villas spent the next 27 years of his life as Food and Wine Editor of *Town & Country* magazine. In addition, he has written for *Esquire*, *Gourmet*, *Food & Wine*, *Bon Appétit*, *Life*, and *The New York Times*, and published a baker's dozen of cookbooks, two novels, and a memoir. Mr. Pig himself was kind enough to chat with us about biscuits, barbecue and his heart-wrenching (for us readers) decision to never write another cookbook

focused on swine. Enjoy...

BBQJew: To put the people reading this interview in the right frame of mind, would you kindly start by highlighting a couple of your most memorable food-related experiences growing up in North Carolina?

James Villas: It seems that everything was food-related, but 1) going every other Saturday morning with my parents to a farm market outside Charlotte for Mother to stock up on country sausage, cured bacon, streak-o'-lean, souse, fresh eggs, butter, and God knows what else; 2) driving with Mother from Charlotte to Glendale Springs in the mountains to pick out a beautiful aged country ham; 3) making biscuits and putting up preserves with Mother.

BBQJew: Well, you must have made Mother proud with your most recent cookbook. I recently bought *Pig: King of the Southern Table* and, honestly, it's spectacular. Was it a challenge to come up with so many recipes and stories about one ingredient or did it come naturally to a native North Carolinian like yourself?

JV: Nothing could have come more naturally, and at least half of those recipes are for dishes I grew up eating one place or another.

BBQJew: The last cookbook you wrote prior to *Pig* was *The Bacon Cookbook*. Did you hesitate to write *Pig* on the heels (should I say hocks?) of another cookbook about hog?

JV: Not for one second. BACON was doing well, so we figured why not just go whole hog and tell the entire story of pig in the South.

BBQJew: Okay, but why write a cookbook focused solely on the pig? And is there any other animal that you think is worthy of a similar "tail to snout" treatment?

JV: Because pig is the very backbone of the South and is a meat beloved by most societies around the world. I suppose the cow would also qualify, but I leave it up to someone else to write an entire book on beef. I never gave that much thought to other animals.

BBQJew: Do you have any immediate plans to write a cookbook called *Tenderloin: High on the Hog*, or perhaps *Knuckle: Really, Pigs Have Knuckles*? Or have you fulfilled your quota of swine-related cookbooks for now? Seriously, is there anything left for you to say about [The Other White Meat](#)?

JV: No more pig books. The present one pretty well covers the subject from head to tail.

BBQJew: Enough beating around the bush. This is a North Carolina barbecue website and our readers demand to know one thing: where does barbecue rank among your favorite pig-based meals? You can be honest, we won't be offended. (Put another way, you already abandoned North Carolina for pignorant New York so you can't offend us anymore than you already have.)

JV: Smack at the top of the list. I live and breathe Carolina chopped pork barbecue, and, living in the North, once became so desperate for authentic Cue that I had to learn to produce it myself—first in a pit (till the police made me stop), then on a simple grill. Every time I return to Carolina, the first thing I must have is barbecue, and the amount I haul back in coolers is embarrassing.

BBQJew: Phew, I was secretly hoping that'd be your answer! Do you recall the place where you most frequently ate barbecue while growing up? Nowadays what are your favorite spots to eat barbecue in North Carolina?

JV: Yes, Blackwelder's and The Boar's Head in Charlotte (both long gone), as well as at numerous church benefits like Mallard Creek. I'll eat barbecue anywhere, but I guess the best is at the places in Lexington, Bob Melton's in Rocky Mount [Editor's note: now out of business], Bridges in Shelby, Wilber's in Goldsboro, Allen's in Chapel Hill, Carolina Barbecue in Statesville, Stamey's in Greensboro, and maybe Turnage's in Durham [Editor's note: same]. By far the greatest restaurant barbecue sauce is at Flip's in Wilmington, and I'd give anything to have the recipe.

BBQJew: You grew up in Charlotte, North Carolina, which is solidly on the Lexington-style side of the state. Does this mean that you are actually willing to go on record stating that you prefer that style of barbecue over Eastern-style? Or, as you did in *Pig*, will you continue to hedge your bets?

JV: By no means do I prefer Lexington-style over Eastern-style and, with a gun at my head, would probably opt for Eastern since I like whole-hog and a drier texture. But the truth is that I love ANY style of Carolina barbecue so long as it's cooked right over hickory and/or oak—long and slow.

BBQJew: Well reasoned. I understand you were Food and Wine Editor at *Town & Country* magazine for 27 years. Speaking of food and beverages, what are your favorite

drinks to pair with barbecue? Do you think it is acceptable to pair wine with barbecue, and if so what type of wine would you recommend?

JV: Wine with barbecue? Are you crazy? That's just plain down silly. With barbecue you drink beer, ice tea, or Pepsi—or hard liquor. Drinking wine with barbecue is as absurd as drinking Coke with French coq au vin.

BBQJew: Uh, yeah, we agree. I mean, uh, [what kind of idiot](#) would even think of pairing wine and barbecue?! Uh, anyway... Imagine an apocalyptic type of event that somehow required you live the rest of your time on this earth only able to buy one cut of hog meat. What part of the pig would you choose and why?

JV: Without question, the shoulder since it can be used to make so many different luscious dishes—including superior barbecue and country sausage. Of course I would also perish without great bacon.

BBQJew: Speaking of bacon, just a couple more questions and then I'll let you get back to giving yourself a bacon-wrap facial or whatever it is you do in between writing books. Seriously, I am curious to know how you think being a professional food writer changes the way you relate to food in your everyday life. Does your profession make you approach the food you eat differently than if you had another line of work?

JV: My passion for food is not the result of my profession; my profession is the result of my passion for food. In my opinion, the greatest sin is indifference to what we eat—and MANY are guilty. I am NOT and never have been a foodie, and I don't associate with many foodies. But I also find it difficult associating with anyone who, like a dog, eats only to survive. My philosophy: If we have to eat to survive, why not learn to do it intelligently and with gusto. Am I obsessed with food? No. I'm obsessed with great classical music, and my ideal scenario would be eating a great barbecue sandwich while listening to the music of Wagner or Bach or Handel.

BBQJew: I thought classical music went best with wine, but that shows what I know. Other than eagerly anticipating your next plate of 'cue, what are you working on now?

JV: I've just turned in a new cookbook on ground meats, poultry, and seafood, and I'm presently working on my third novel (the second—[Hungry for Happiness](#)—will be published in a few weeks). The first, [Dancing in the Lowcountry](#), is Southern to the core.

BBQJew: Do you have any final words of wisdom for your 'cue loving compatriots in the Old North State?

JV: Never, EVER forget that North Carolina is indeed the barbecue capital of the world, and always stay hungry for the next sandwich or plate of Cue—with, of course, coleslaw, Brunswick stew, and plenty of hot hush puppies.