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WHAT'S COOKIN' WITH GRAMPA BOO

BY ANNE SPISELMAN

PHOTOS BY GRANT KESSLER

When Patrick Williams II was a ten year old helping his grandfather barbecue for their whole Jackson, Michigan neighborhood every summer Saturday, he never dreamed that 35 years later he'd start a business selling the sauce that "Grampa Boo" (who got his nickname because his grandsons couldn't say William "Barnett") learned to make from an older Southern gentleman with a treasured family recipe. Although he happily recalls cooking everything-from-scratch Thanksgiving dinners with his grandmother as early as age four, he didn't even think about a culinary career of any kind until he was 40.

Instead, Williams followed in the footsteps of his father, who was a draftsman/engineer for the aerospace industry. After graduating from Michigan State University in 1987 with a degree in industrial design and engineering art, he worked as a conceptual artist for General Motors for five years then became a structural engineer for vari-



ous telecommunications giants. As head construction manager for tower development, the former football player traveled the world, scaling towers as tall as 500 feet in Taiwan, China, Spain, and South America. "The only connection with food was that I was the adventurous one in the group," he recalls, "so while my colleagues wanted to stay at the hotel, I was eager to visit the markets and eat local specialties."

In his twelfth year on the job, A T & T sent Williams to Curacao, where he contracted dengue fever. The company relocated him to Florida, but he was laid off after it was bought out by Cingular. Returning to Chicago, he was at loose ends until his wife Daina suggested culinary school as a way to tap into his love of food and cooking. Williams enrolled in the School of Culinary Arts at Kendall College in 2003, completed the three-year Culinary Arts degree in a year and a half, was accepted into the Brennan family's restaurant internship program, and was all ready to head to New Orleans—when hurricane Katrina hit. Sidetracked again, he became sous chef at Chicago's South and Speakeasy Supper Club, then chef at Speakeasy, before spending a year and a half as chef de cuisine at classmate Steve Tebo's new, seasonal Coho Café in Frankfort, Michigan.

It was while Williams was at Coho Café, where he still returns for big events, that the idea of bottling and marketing the barbecue sauce was born. He used it for specials, such as barbecued rib day on July 4th, and after learning from his mother the whole story about his grandfather, who died in 1980 at age 92, he started researching ingredients and packaging. "My Mom recreated the recipe from her memory of what she'd written down from talking to her mother,"

Photograph of Grampa Boo courtesy of Patrick Williams II

he explains. “It turns out she was pretty close, though, because she subsequently found the written version—which she hadn’t seen in 30 years—in her recipe file.”

Translating that recipe into usable terms was a challenge Williams undertook after he returned to Chicago in 2006 and, disenchanted with the restaurant scene, started working as a personal chef, initially for several families but currently for one family full-time. “The original recipe was from the 1940s and lacked real measurements,” he explains. “It read something like ‘take a can of this, add a splash of that, and cook until it tastes like such-and-such.’” He knew it was a vinegar-tomato sauce with brown sugar and a couple of distinct spices but he had to figure out the proportions.

Williams won’t divulge his recipe for Grampa Boo’s Basting & Barbeque Sauce beyond saying that he boils canned tomato puree and apple-cider vinegar, adds light brown sugar and spices that include cayenne pepper, turns down the heat, and simmers for several hours. “I know when it’s done by the aroma,” he says. “The memory of that smell from my grandfather’s kitchen clicked in the first time I made the sauce.” He adds that the apple-cider vinegar has more flavor than white vinegar, while the light-brown sugar doesn’t over-sweeten or overpower the sauce like dark-brown sugar would. “The beauty is that the sauce is really simple, but the key is cooking it just the right amount. If it’s over-reduced, it’s too sweet; if it isn’t simmered long enough, it’s too vinegary. Also, it can burn easily.”

All-natural and gluten-free, the sauce is prepared by Williams at Centered Chefs in Chicago, when space is available, and at Rose’s WheatFree Bakery in Evanston. Williams started production in the spring of 2008 with 10 gallons and has upped his output to 50 gallons twice a month. He packages the sauce in 500 ml miniature glass jugs for retail, both for recycling purposes and because glass helps the flavor and structure of the sauce as “vinegar and plastic aren’t a good match.” The brown labels are biodegradable paper and tell the story of Grampa Boo’s Basting & Barbeque Sauce in recycled ink.

Williams hopes to switch to making the sauce with local organic ingredients by the end of this year, though he says the costs, sourcing, and process of getting organic certification are sticking points. He does plan to bring out a spicier second version this summer.

Grampa Boo’s Basting & Barbeque Sauce is available by mail order (\$10; <http://boosbarbeque.com>), at Dusty Cellars Wine Shop in Lansing, Michigan, and at Rose’s WheatFree Bakery in Evanston (2901 Central, 847-859-2723), which sells it in the retail jugs (\$12) and serves it in the 34-seat café.

Anne Spiselman is a long-time food and dining writer based in Chicago who tells the stories of local-preneurs for Edible Chicago. Lucky for us, she’s always in search of the next incredibly Edible.

