

Bryan Schaaf:

Back on the Meat Speak Podcast powered by the Certified Angus Beef brand. Year 2020, obviously was not the favorite year for an awful lot of reasons, but one of the reasons that we wanted to talk about today, actually, has everything to do with a culinary legend who was lost just before the turn of the new year. We're talking about Mike Mills, right, actually nicknamed The Legend. And as we go, we're going to visit with some of Mike's closest friends in the industry, but here within our inner circle here at Certified Angus Beef, we have our own really strong connection to Mike Mills, and it's certainly if you've followed the podcast for any amount of time, our barbecue liaison, our barbecue aficionado, chef Michael Ollier. He has joined us in studio, chef, how you doing?

Michael Ollier:

I'm great.

Bryan Schaaf:

Excellent, excellent. I wanted to reach out to you because you, probably more so than anybody else here, I think we've all touched Mike in various ways. I have a kind of a ridiculous story of showing up from a Whataburger at 3:00 AM and-

Michael Ollier:

That was us, right?

Bryan Schaaf:

Yeah. I believe so. That said, you were closer to Mike than I think any of us here. So, if you could talk to us about that, we've talked to it on previous podcasts about your journey into barbecue from fine dining, from French chefing. Mike was very much one on that journey, right?

Michael Ollier:

Yeah, for sure. I'm fortunate enough to have met Mike, boy, years ago, and I think it was at a National Barbecue Association yearly event that they hold, and met Mike and knew that he was special, by his reputation, of course. But then when you have moments to sit by The Legend, then you realize really the special nature of this man. He is an inherent giver, and I think that's what barbecue and the barbecue family is all about, and I think if you put the poster guy, like that's The Legend for a reason. And I think many people would share the same sentiment I'm sharing, is that time spent with Mike, you knew was special.

Michael Ollier:

And it didn't matter, Bryan, this is what was great about Mike. He met you where you were in your journey, and as accomplished as he has been in the competition circuit, and every everything else with what he's doing at 17th Street, and the legacy left behind is so amazing. But he's still able to come to where you are in your journey and help everyone no matter where they are in the barbecue. So, I'm talking about, if you're thinking about open up barbecue joint, he's actually used as a consultant for something like that. Some big names in barbecue have done just that.

Michael Ollier:

Or if you're just a backyard enthusiast, I'm struggling with a brisket, I'm struggling with some ribs, he'll tell you exactly how to do it. So, time spent with him, and I've had fortune enough to either prep and learning about whole hog doing that, or even like scraping some fat off some back ribs at a national barbecue event that we helped him at, like in the middle of the night, right? He's there, hands on, scraping the excess fat because he knew that every single bite needed to be special.

Michael Ollier:

So, he's passed a lot onto me, and I'm grateful for that, but this last weekend I was able to go to the Murphysboro Cookout, and this was the first one without Mike. And it was the first time that we had done well, it was the annual conference that we would normally have done, and I've never been able to go to this. So, I was able to have special time with Amy and that was a great memorial to a special man. So, great connection with an amazing guy.

Bryan Schaaf:

Outstanding. Chef, we're not going to turn you loose just yet, we're going to roll into some friends of Mike to share their thoughts and their reflections, but there is a poem that I believe you actually have captured, that I would like to go ahead and steal the audio of and plug that in here. If we can actually figure that out.

Michael Ollier:

Great idea, we'll figure that out. It was a special moment to share for sure.

Bryan Schaaf:

Yeah. So, if you can, I think we're actually going to roll with that, and then Amy Mills, Mike's daughter and business partner is going to join us to talk a bit about her dad, but can you set the stage, tell us about this poem?

Michael Ollier:

Well, let's see. This was kind of an impromptu toast to Mike for the first time that he wasn't at the Murphysboro Cookout. And it was put together by Brian Neely, he's the guy from Smoke Freaks, so let's give credit where credits due. It was a toast with, what is that apple flavored Budweiser drink? Do you know what it is? I don't even know, but it's, it's kind of like that cider-y tasting. It was actually pretty delicious, I'm not really a Bud drinker, but it was actually really good, and maybe it tasted especially sweet knowing the sentiment and what we were doing that morning. Mike Mills, his boots were right there. And the water tank of Murphysboro was right there in the background, and it was a special morning, those that actually heard this poem where we're really touched, and it's worth sharing with a larger audience, for sure.

Michael Ollier:

And I've done that, and I've loved it, and it's my honor today to offer this toast.

Speaker 3:

Mmm, apple.

Michael Ollier:

So, now that we've fired all the smokers and grills, we gather to pay tribute to a man named Mills. For Mike's not with us, nine months gone by, we call them The Legend, now let's review why. He always had vision for this wonderful town. He started at dental lab making implants and crowns, but that gave no hint of who Mike would become. I mean, the man served barbecue on Air Force One. He was a mentor towards many and a friend to all, and his first time at Memphis, GC overall, he won half a million trophies in restaurant acclaim, so it's really no wonder he's in the 'cue Hall of Fame. And though I offer this toast under a bittersweet cloud, I know Mike's up there looking down at us, proud. So, if you get in a jam, whether in life or in 'cue, just stop for a minute. Ask what would Mike do? Good luck, everybody.

Speaker 3:

Praise the lord!

Bryan Schaaf:

[inaudible 00:06:20] on the Meat Speak Podcast powered by the Certified Angus Beef brand, Bryan Schaaf, I am standing in the fairgrounds in Lynchburg, Tennessee, which if you don't know what Lynchburg Tennessee is famous for, it is the world's number one brand of Tennessee whiskey, Jack Daniels. Every drop of it is actually made right here in Lynchburg. If you want to learn more, go back to season one, we have an episode with the former master distiller of Jack Daniels, Jeff Arnett. You can get all the details on the Jack and the competition while we're here. That said, the Jack World Barbecue Championships happens every year. In itself, could kind of be its own hour and a half long discussion point on all the things that happen here, but we wanted to take today because this is the first Jack we've had in a long time where there's a familiar face who's missing, right?

Bryan Schaaf:

And, of course, we're talking about Mike Mills, The Legend, right? And when you're called The Legend by your peers in these circles, that should kind of tell you all you need to know about the individual himself, but if you don't know, Mike, he's got a fascinating story, but he runs 17th Street Barbecue in Murphysboro, Illinois, and a second location nearby as well. But he really made his name in competition barbecue circuits. He's a four time world champion. He's won the Jack, he's won Memphis in May multiple times, in the popular vernacular of mainstream, he is a legend. And who better to talk about this, than his daughter for one, but also a barbecue legend in her own right, Mike's right hand woman, his daughter in everything that he's done, including co-publishing Peace, Love, and Barbecue, which received a James Beard nomination in 2006, Amy Mills. Amy, thank you so much for joining us.

Amy Mills:

Thank you so much for having me. It's such a pleasure.

Bryan Schaaf:

Oh my gosh, I'm so happy to be down here. Of course, this has got to be a little surreal, a little different for you. Obviously, this is the first one you've done without your dad. Going through a lot of memories in your head as, as you're getting ready for the judging today?

Amy Mills:

So many memories, when just pulling into town was very bittersweet. This whole year will just be a year of firsts and I have steeled myself for that, but it definitely hits you as you drive through. And then

especially as I walk down the hill and saw all the cookers and all of our friends, and he's missing. So, that's really tough.

Bryan Schaaf:

If you could, tell us about your dad, because it's a really easy rabbit hole to fall down, especially when you start to realize there was a dentistry background in there before anything that had to do with barbecue.

Amy Mills:

Well, my dad did so many things in his life, but barbecue is really the common thread that ran through his entire life, from the time he was an infant in his crib, to the time he passed away. Building the 17th Street empire, and I think what he was most proud of is that he inherently knew that barbecue brings people together and that barbecue could help save our little town. And I'm not sure save is the right word, but it definitely is a main attraction in town, and on any given day, we have people from four or five states or countries who are visiting at 17th Street. So, that is so special to us that we are able to be a shrine to which people flock and he built that. And he would always tell you, "The plan is there is no plan."

Amy Mills:

It all happened very organically, but he was so smart and, so clever and just so genuinely good, and that goodness drew good people to him. And I think if he is to be known for anything, it is that generosity is a recipe for success. And he gave away freely, knowledge and helped so many other people come up in the barbecue world. Really, so many things the barbecue is today can be directly attributed back to him, and I'm really proud of that, and I know deep down, he was proud of that too, although he would never talk about that.

Bryan Schaaf:

You're exactly right. You start to learn about Mike Mills, you start to realize the reach that he had, because of not only who he was, but the ability that he had to just make really good barbecue, whether it be whole hog or, of course, we're always prone to the brisket in our circles. But talk about that. You talk about the people that he would've helped. Blue Smoke in New York City, he has his fingerprints on it. You'd mentioned Michael Simon, law of these culinary bastions have a direct link with your dad.

Amy Mills:

Well, so many people were drawn to him, and through our OnCue classes, we helped incubate dozens and dozens of barbecue restaurants. And in fact, when he passed away, I heard from literally every continent except Antarctica. We have no reach in Antarctica, but Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Europe, Russia, the Ukraine, England, France, Germany, it was unbelievable the number of people who have come to 17th Street, come to one of our classes, and then started their own brand of barbecue elsewhere. And what he really believed was that he was not ever trying to teach you what to do, or what his flavors are, showing you what worked for him and hoping that you took that and put your own spin on it because that's the beauty of barbecue. No two barbecues are the same, and every barbecue is somebody's favorite.

Bryan Schaaf:

Excellent. How about for yourself? Was barbecue always in the cards for you or? We talked to a lot of family farms, and it's like the kids go off, they do their thing, and they're like, "Oh, I actually do think I want to do this."

Amy Mills:

Right. That's exactly what happened. I went away to Mizzou, to journalism school, and lived briefly in Dallas, but a much longer stint in Boston, doing marketing and PR for a variety of companies. And then around 2000, I took all of that knowledge and came back and did it at 17th Street, most of that time, living still in Boston, but traveling back and forth frequently. And now I am happily ensconced in Southern Illinois even though I do still have my home in Hingham, Massachusetts. I may never get there again, but I do still have a very expensive storage unit there.

Bryan Schaaf:

Outstanding. So, if you could, before we turn loose, because I hear our pal Chip Chapman, the emcee of the competition here, calling the judges in soon. But can you give us the state of 17th Street? What's in store, what's around the corner, what's the future look like for you guys?

Amy Mills:

Sure. We are rocking and rolling. We are still, obviously, in the middle of a pandemic, even though people think we're not. We have been ravaged by that, and we are trying to right the ship a little bit, but we've opened a barbecue sauce factory, we're building a coffee shop, we have our two restaurants, event center, catering, mail order, OnCue classes are going to ramp up again in 2022.

Amy Mills:

So, we are not going to skip a beat. We're going to weather the storm and find the people we need to get back open fully. We are closed a couple of days a week just due to staffing issues, but we are so lucky to have such a deep group of people who've been with us from anywhere from eight to 22 years, which is unbelievable in the restaurant industry. So, now we're just trying to add that next layer of people to become those long timers at 17th Street, we plan to build upon and honor the legacy my dad left us. He left us a great roadmap to follow. We know exactly what to do. We just have to do, what would Mike Mills do? And we're all going to be okay.

Bryan Schaaf:

Excellent. Also, I have yet to make the pilgrimage to Murphysboro. I've heard a rumor there is a warehouse that contains all the trophies. How many trophies are we talking about?

Amy Mills:

It doesn't really contain all the trophies because lots of trophies were given to other people to take home, but there's quite a storehouse up there and it's a real fun photo up.

Bryan Schaaf:

That's excellent. Ms. Amy Mills. I don't want to keep you from judging. This is a prestigious honor. That said, thank you so much for taking time to join us. You're going to hear some other familiar faces, especially if you're involved in the world of barbecue, and you'll probably hear some people that you

recognize if you aren't in the world of barbecue, but we're here to honor the life and contributions of the great Mike Mills on the Meat Speak Podcast. Amy Mills, thank you so much for taking time.

Amy Mills:

Thank you so much, and the fact that you have chosen to honor my dad means so much. He was a huge fan of Certified Angus Beef. He loved the time he spent on field trips with you and having you all at our warehouse in Murphysboro, and we look forward to continuing that relationship.

Bryan Schaaf:

Thank you so much.

Bryan Schaaf:

All right, back in on the Meat Speak Podcast, coming to you from the Jack Daniels World Barbecue Championships. Next to me, actually, former podcast guest. But if you're talking about the round table of barbecue icons, he certainly has a seat there. Mr. Chris Lilly from big Bob Gibson's in Decatur, Alabama, how are you doing, sir?

Chris Lilly:

I'm doing fantastic, but that introduction just means that I'm old, I think.

Bryan Schaaf:

Well, one of the things we're talking about today is we're paying tribute to a guy who is a long time friend of yours, Mr. Mike Mills. Can you talk to us about that? Obviously the big Bob Gibson name through the history of barbecue, it goes back almost a hundred years by now, but the family or wife's family, you guys are so interwoven in the barbecue world, you've crossed paths many, many times with the Mills family, right?

Chris Lilly:

Oh, absolutely. When I started barbecuing and getting out, Mike was already here, he was already doing, he was already a veteran, and that was what's so great about Mike. Whether you are a competitive cooker, he's done it. He's a world champion many times over. Whether you are entrepreneur, he's done it. Whether you are a family owned barbecue restaurant, he's done it. He is in every facet of barbecue leadership, all across the country, within BBQA. He's been there and he does it. More important about Mike is, he's not only done it, he's willing to share his experiences, his mistakes, and all the opportunities. He's willing to sit down with you, especially if you're new and talk to you honestly about the barbecue industry, give you input and guidance. That was Mike Mills.

Chris Lilly:

He was a friend in barbecue, he was especially friendly to the people who needed it the most, who needed the most help, who needed that pat on the back. Mike Mills was always there.

Bryan Schaaf:

Outstanding. When you look at barbecue in general, we've always said, "If the whole world was made up of barbecue of people, the biggest issue we'd have in society is sauce or no sauce." But you look at

Mike, you look at the man himself, the kindness, the approachability, that's really the human embodiment of what this whole thing's about, isn't it?

Chris Lilly:

Exactly what it is. Barbecue is not the meat on the grill and when your chicken wings are coming up, barbecue is the time, it's the environment. It is how you spend your time, and more importantly, who you spend your time with while the meat slowly cooks on the grill. That my friends is barbecue. It's community, whether that be in your own hometown or at the national level. And Mike was a huge icon in both segments of the barbecue industry.

Bryan Schaaf:

Outstanding. You've competed in this many times, you've judged many times. Do you have a preference? Is it a little less pressure on days like this when you're here?

Chris Lilly:

No, you get here on judging day and you smell that smoke and immediately you have barbecue withdrawals. You want to be cooking it. That's no question. I think I've cooked this contest 11 years. I've judged it, I think, maybe two or three years, you always want to be cooking and turning into the judges, but I'll tell you, so far so good in the judging tent. Delicious food, the teams have absolutely performed today. It's going to be tough to crown a champion at Jack Daniels.

Bryan Schaaf:

Outstanding, sir. I believe chicken's coming up next, right?

Chris Lilly:

We just had chicken.

Bryan Schaaf:

Oh, it was just chicken. I know, I know brisket's coming up because that's when I start to strategically make my rounds and wait for the burn ends that didn't make the final cut to come out. So, that's it, man. I'll let you get back to your judging, and thanks for taking time here with us, sir.

Chris Lilly:

Good to see you brother.

Bryan Schaaf:

Good seeing you.

Bryan Schaaf:

Still here at the Jack Daniels World Barbecue Championship sitting on a bale of straw. Next to me is a good friend of Certified Angus Beef, who actually we knew before we even had ever been to the Jack. He's been to all 32 Jack Daniels competitions, first as a judge, but most recently, I say most recently, it's been a lot of years now, as the emcee, as the man behind the microphone, Chip Chapman, the favorite weather man across all of Chattanooga, Tennessee. How you doing, sir?

Chip Chapman:

I'm very good. How are you doing?

Bryan Schaaf:

Outstanding. Although I'll tell you what, I dressed for Jack Daniels in November, not October, I didn't realize it was 90 degrees in October down here.

Chip Chapman:

Join the crowd, join the crowd. I know those of you who are listening to this can't see what I'm doing, but I'm actually doing my Charlie Daniels impression. This is Elvin Bishop sitting on a bale of hay. And much like the thought song says, "I ain't good looking, but I sure can play at least at doing what I'm doing here." It's a great, great weekend. We're glad to have you and chef Michael down here in the holler once again.

Bryan Schaaf:

Yes, sir. It's become an annual tradition for us, which we look forward to every year. But I now know that when it's in October, I'm going to bring some shorts.

Chip Chapman:

Next October is going to be 41 degrees and windy.

Bryan Schaaf:

That's right. You heard it from the weatherman himself. We're talking all things Mike Mills today, honoring The Legend. And I say The Legend, that's a name given to him by his peers in the barbecue industry, which you tell you all you really need to know about the man. Tell us about your interactions with Mike over the years.

Chip Chapman:

Over the years, Mike and I judged a lot of contests before I switched into the emcee role. And I would always find myself sitting at Mike's table, purely through good luck, except for one year I intentionally switched with someone else. He was such a fountain of knowledge for anything having to do with food period. But barbecue was his thing. He knew barbecue is a delicate combination of art and science. And you got to know your way around the kitchen, you got to know your way around a pit, you got to know your way around the pallet, and nobody knew all three of those things any better than Mike Mills.

Bryan Schaaf:

Yeah. You know, we've been coming down here, I think this is my fifth or sixth Jack that I've been at, and the thing about barbecue, and we chatted with Chris Lilly about it earlier, is this is as much of a family reunion as anything, and we feel that when we come down here, of course we run into you, we run into famous Dave as always, the famous Dave. Which to me, I'm always like, that's the dude. But Mike Mills was, was always one of those people that you look forward to seeing when you came down here. Is there a cloud over you? There's just something missing this year.

Chip Chapman:



Yeah, I think there is the barbecue community, or like I call it, it's an extended family. Yeah, we lost Mike, and since the last Jack barbecue, we've lost Mike, we lost March Plumber, we lost Jim Tabb, and those three have been here, not for of them, but for most. And like any family reunion, when you go to it and your favorite uncle is not there, it's really noticeable. It's kind of like the 800 pound gorilla in the room. And we addressed it earlier with Mike during the competition, when the turn in first started, everybody was anxious to hear about him. And I'll tell you something that I have always said for years, for years, and I defy anybody to tell me differently. If there was a Mount Rushmore of barbecue, Mike Mills' would be the first face up on it.

Chip Chapman:

Mike Mills would be the first face up on it, should probably have several of the other folks who are here judging with us this year. Pat, of course, Pat and Mike go back decades. I mean, decades, Paul Kurt, he's certainly worthy of consideration. Johnny Trig, Johnny's here. You look at just those four guys alone, right? They own 80% of the barbecue knowledge in the world. And the other 20%, the rest of us just have to spread out amongst ourselves. Those guys are simply brilliant at what they do.

Chip Chapman:

And another thing about Mike, when he was judging a plate, if I sat down before him, I never started eating before he did. And I would watch his eyes. Laser like focus on everything on that plate. Doesn't matter what it was. Then he'd take a knife and turn over a piece of brisket, press it gently, do the same thing with the next piece. The guy was dissecting it with his eyes, and then he would take a whiff of it, and finally he'd taste it. So I learned a lot about this thing, we call barbecue from Mike Mills and I'm very honored to have called him a friend.

Bryan Schaaf:

Outstanding. Your last question before we turn you loose here, obviously, last year with COVID, there was no Jack. To be back at it this year, I know last night you talked about how many days, how many hours, how many minutes it's been since everybody here has been together? Does it feel good? Does it feel like we're back into it? To really hit the ground running, I know the briskets coming up next, eventually you get into the awards tonight, does it feel like we're back on track?

Chris Lilly:

To be totally honest with you, it feels like a transition year. It feels like next year we'll be back totally on track because our international teams will be here. Travel ban's still in place. But yeah, I'd say we are most of the way there, but no international this year, no Shade Tree this year. You really got to have that to make the Jack what everyone think of it as. So, for the most part, yeah, those two elements back, and hopefully we don't lose any more members of our barbecue family. Yeah. Next year we'll be back bigger, stronger and better than ever.

Bryan Schaaf:

We're down here at the Jack Daniels World Barbecue Championships, talking about The Legend, Mike Mills. With me now, all the way from Yazoo Mississippi, our good pal, Craig Verhage, better known as The Barbecue Ninja. How you doing, sir?

Craig Verhage:

Man? I'm doing wonderful. Eating good barbecue, got great weather, the people are out in droves here at the hollow at Lynchburg, Tennessee, and man, this is great.

Bryan Schaaf:

Outstanding. We're talking about Mike Mills, 17th Street Barbecue, Apple City Barbecue. Tell us about some of your interactions with him over the years.

Craig Verhage:

Man, I'll tell you, when I started in barbecue, I cooked with Garry Roark and Pat Burke, and Bill From, they were some guys that were out there that were just absolute icons in barbecue, and even then to say the word pitmaster, that was my model of a pitmaster.

Craig Verhage:

And it took me a long time before I would even acknowledge when somebody would call me a pitmaster because that was the guys that I had on that pedestal. And those were the guys that were pitmasters to me. It's a loosely used term these days, and when I hear somebody that has a grill in their backyard and they may have done a couple of YouTube videos, call themselves a pitmaster, I think that's Garry Roark, Mike Mills, Pat Burke, Bill From, those guys. And Mike Mills was just a wonderful guy, and he was just like my mentor, Garry Roark, meant the world to me.

Bryan Schaaf:

In a lot of ways, barbecue is as much about the family as it is the food. Does it feel like the family's a little different this year? He was such a staple in this community.

Craig Verhage:

Yeah. I gravitate to those guys, the guys that I mentioned, and I just like to see close to them, I like to pick their brains, and Mike was one of those guys, when we would go to an event, that I'd like to get off to the side and him and I have a seat together and just hear him tell stories of the accomplishments that he had. But more than that, he would just tell you life lessons. He was a lot like Garry, they're old school guys. They're heroes of mine.

Bryan Schaaf:

Outstanding. How's the competition going today? You're judging, you filled up yet?

Craig Verhage:

I saved a little room. I paced myself pretty good today. We've got brisket left, and we've got dessert left, and of course dessert is always a spectacle at this place. I've done pretty good so far. After a few years of doing this, I figured it out a little better.

Bryan Schaaf:

Outstanding Craig Verhage, Barbecue Ninja. Thanks for taking time with us, sir.

Craig Verhage:

Thank you, my friend.

Bryan Schaaf:

Back here on the Meat Speak Podcast powered by the Certified Angus Beef Brand, coming to you now via Zoom. I'm in the World headquarters of Premium Beef here in Western Ohio, coming to us all the way from his location in Brooklyn, New York, we're talking all things about Mike Mills, who is a bastion in the world of barbecue and it gives me great pleasure to talk to, really another icon barbecue as Mike's career has been. Well, this guy is behind Dinosaur Bar-B-Que. It's been around since the early 1980s and is still doing it's thing, still continuing to grow. Mr. John Stage from Dinosaur Bar-B-Que, how you doing, sir?

John Stage:

[inaudible 00:28:39] How you doing, man? Good seeing you.

Bryan Schaaf:

Glad to have you on. I don't like having to talk to you under these circumstances, but Dinosaur Bar-B-Que is an icon in the restaurant industry, in the barbecue industry. You ran in a lot of the same circles as Mike Mills. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

John Stage:

God, me and Mike met years and years ago at the Big Apple Barbecue, I'm going to say, the second year of the Big Apple Barbecue is when we met. It's just one of those things, you just hit it off with somebody, and same thing with Amy, we became friends over the years. Mike's one of those guys, if you don't see him for six months, it seems like you just seen him yesterday, you just picked up right where you left off.

Bryan Schaaf:

Yeah. Can you talk about him? There's really two segments, there's the competition side of barbecue and that's kind of its own beast, and of course Mike has, I think, a warehouse full of trophies from there.

John Stage:

Right, right. Hence The Legend.

Bryan Schaaf:

That's right. But of course, 17th Street, in tiny Murphysboro, Illinois, but then you look at his contributions to the industry, right? And the fact that he's got close ties with Danny Meyer, right? And the Blue Smoke group close to where you're at right now. You look at the work that he's done with Michael Simon over the years. Can you talk about that? Like that presence? And I guess, the things that he brought to the restaurant side of the barbecue industry.

John Stage:

He was almost like, what was that [foreign language 00:30:26], where you would wait to see if he drank the coffee and liked the coffee? Mike just had a presence about him. And everyone wanted his blessing on a lot of things. So, I think he was, to use the word, iconic, but beyond that, he was just a good dude too. So, I looked at him through that point, like he was a friend, but yeah, he was a badass, man. It's the only way I could really, he's a good dude and nobody knew barbecue more. And he was a true barbecue man. Definitely.

Bryan Schaaf:

Excellent. Can you help us connect some of those dots, right? You guys are in upstate New York and barbecue sometimes gets classified for its, I guess, regional dynamics. I know there's a t-shirt hanging on the wall of Peg Leg Porker in Tennessee at Carrey Bringle's place that says "If you want brisket, go to Texas." Especially with the Blue Smoke folks that are in New York City with what you guys do, can you talk to us? What is barbecue in your neck of the woods like?

John Stage:

Well, barbecue in our neck of the woods. So, I started this in Syracuse, New York. Well actually, in 1983 I started as a mobile concession business and I would travel up and down the East Coast, and once I got down south, now I was cooking sausage, peppers, and onions, and steak sandwiches, but I made my own barbecue sauce to make myself different. Now being from New York, I didn't know what barbecue was. So, once I started going past the Mason-Dixon Line, I was told in no uncertain terms that this was not barbecue. So, I had to find out what that was all about. From my point of view, and I think anybody now from the Northeast, we don't have a tradition. So, we made our own tradition, and it was taking the influence of, for me, it was Memphis out of the gate.

John Stage:

Memphis was everything to me when I first started in my career. And then years later with brisket, having a Texas influence. So, it's taken the tradition of the bastions of barbecue and then putting our own spin on it. But I don't have a tradition. I have to follow because I'm in a geographical location. So, we just borrow some techniques, but I don't care if you're in Syracuse, Lockhart, Texas, if we're burning wood and cooking low and slow, we're all doing the same thing, just different regions of the country.

John Stage:

And then it becomes what you're seasoning, your side dishes, your ambiance. Syracuse, New York, we're barbecuing in three degree weather sometimes. So, there's all kinds of factors, what woods do you got, we have upstate New York, there's a lot of apple wood, very similar to Mike in Murphysboro, had, great apple wood. So, your wood affects what your barbecue is also. We have a lot of hickory, oak, so it all plays in, but I don't ever say I'm a Texas style barbecue or Memphis. We just do our own thing with the influences from the regions.

Bryan Schaaf:

Outstanding. And give us a quick rundown, you guys have, is it nine locations now?

John Stage:

Six. No, we got one in Harlem, one in Brooklyn, and then we're in Syracuse, the original, Rochester, Buffalo and Troy New York.

Bryan Schaaf:

Excellent. Excellent. John Stage from Dinosaur Bar-B-Que. Man, we appreciate you taking time out of your schedule.

John Stage:

Oh, thanks for having me.

Bryan Schaaf:

Oh, we appreciate you, sir. Thanks for joining us on the Meat Speak Podcast powered by the Certified Angus Beef Brand.

Bryan Schaaf:

Back here on the Meat Speak Podcast powered by the Certified Angus Beef Brand, Bryan Schaaf, joined in studio here by chef Michael Ollier, he's a chef by trade, he's a barbecue aficionado by choice, right? You don't choose the barbecue life, the barbecue life.

Michael Ollier:

It chooses you. That's right.

Bryan Schaaf:

That's right. So, we're here today celebrating all things about The Legend, Mike Mills, who sadly moved on to a better place back in December of 2020. Chef, you'd mentioned at the beginning of the show, we heard people talk about Mike's contributions, not just in competition barbecue, but he's got his fingerprints on Blue Smoke in New York City and, just everywhere, Michael Simon, in the development of Mabel's. Everybody was touched by Mike in some way, shape or form, but you'd mentioned there was also that backyard barbecue enthusiast that he would also meet you there, those types of folks and industry folks would always come out to this Whole Hog Extravaganza. Right?

Michael Ollier:

Yeah, there'd be quite a few at that. So, Amy would organize that as part of her OnCue consulting or OnCue events that she does, and the Whole Hog Extravaganza, and Brisket Bonanza. Is that what we call it? Beef Bonanza? Brisket Bonanza? I think it's Brisket bonanza. I'll have to ask Amy now, I don't remember. We got the beef component in there is the point, but yeah, so there might be like three whole hogs being cooked in slightly different techniques by a few different icons and some of the descendants of the Mike Mills team that have learned and moved on and have their own places will come and show off how to do whole hog in different ways, quite an educational experience, and we've been a component of that so we can teach a little bit of beef breakdown.

Michael Ollier:

So, a lot of people don't know where the briskets come from. They know okay, it's in the four quarter. It's great, but we'll bring a modified four quarter and pull it out and show people, we'll peel the brisket out and show them exactly where it is. That'd be our own Diana Clark, and myself and Gavin Pinto, our test kitchen guy and meat enthusiast. He's the guy. So, all three of us have been there in the special place of Murphysboro, And I guess what the thing to share and the sentiment to share and I'll reinforce is, that Mike meets you where you are. You realize now, it's always what we've lost when we think of how special those things are, I think about those special moments that you have one on one time with this guy, or it's a select group of guys, and you just look at yourself, this is kind of special.

Michael Ollier:

You realize it in the moment. This is kind of cool. Like I'm, I'm picking up a lot of nuggets of knowledge and this guy's pretty cool. And, it's just, that is barbecue. And this is what I hope, to truly honor this

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guy, it's that sentiment traveling forward. It's that sentiment of, we are givers and we're welcoming everyone at this table, no matter where they come from.

Bryan Schaaf:

Well said, well said. That's barbecue, right? It's the old, "If all the world we're made of barbecue people, our biggest issues would have to do with sauce or no sauce."

Michael Ollier:

Yes. That's so true.

Bryan Schaaf:

What a wonderful world it would be. So, Chef Michael Ollier, I appreciate you for joining us here on the Meat Speak Podcast. Also, huge, huge thanks to, to Amy Mills, Mike's daughter, to Chris Lilly, to the Barbecue Ninja Craig Verhage, to Chip Chapman, our favorite weather man down in Chattanooga, Tennessee, also the emcee of the Jack. And of course, to John Stage from Dinosaur Bar-B-Que. Chef, before we roll, any parting shots.

Michael Ollier:

Yeah. So, let's reinforce that line from that great poem. "So, if you get in a jam, whether in life or in 'cue, just stop for a moment and ask what would Mike do?"

Bryan Schaaf:

Beautifully said, sir. Until next time, we will be back with a fresh episode launching two weeks from now. But in the meantime, please, please, please know how much we appreciate you taking time to listen to this episode, to listen to past episodes, give us a like, give us subscribe. If you can find us on Apple Podcasts, it's that little purple icon on your phone, give us a star ranking, leave us a review and just know that it just helps with our visibility, and in this particular case, it certainly helps with the visibility of an episode like this to really honor a great man and his contributions to the industry. So, til next time, Chef Ollier, thanks for joining us.

Michael Ollier:

My pleasure.