

Bradenton Herald

Palmetto man bottles barbecue sauces

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Elmer Hilker has followed through on a dream that began three decades ago by bottling his own barbecue finishing sauce. The product can now be found at local retailers such as the Chop Shop in Bradenton and the Palmetto Meat Shop. JOSH SALMAN/Bradenton Herald

PALMETTO -- Elmer Hilker has heard the same spiel at family barbecues for three decades.

"This chicken is unbelievable." "What did you put on the Boston butt?" "You would make a killing if you bottled this stuff."

The 61-year-old Palmetto man would always laugh it off.

Hilker grew up on Smoky Mountain barbecue. The Charlotte native gravitated to the grill, tailgated at football games and mastered a sauce his family and friends have come to drool over.

For Hilker, it was just a hobby he loved. Never in a million years did he think it would become a career.

Now, he's thinking national distribution.

"We kind of knew we might have something here because everyone wanted it," Hilker said. "You dream about bottling it, but then you think 'Hey, everyone's got a sauce out there.'"

Apparently, they're not quite like his.

Hilker launched E's Best Barbecue Smoky Mountain Finishing Sauce in March, and a product that started on his family dinner table now can be found at select retailers in Manatee.

Bottled by a company in St. Augustine, Hilker has sold one-third of the inaugural 97-case batch. He's already planning another run in three months.

Hilker moved to Manatee with his wife Jan in 1983, raising two daughters, Katy and Kristyn, here. He worked most of his career in advertising, specializing in product copy and video productions.

But when Hilker was let go from his position of six years with Raytheon, a government technology contractor, he began giving some serious consideration to an idea he joked about with friends and family for 27 years.

Hilker first began informally bottling his Carolina sauce to give out as Christmas gifts. As demand for the product grew, he spent just about every evening leading up to the holidays in the kitchen, handing out some six or seven cases.

"It really became a ministry for us," Hilker said. "We would give it out to people when they were sick or when someone died. I didn't bottle this product because I like it. I bottled it because other people like it."

Hilker has acquired product liability insurance, FDA approval and is in the process of trademarking. He's formed an LLC, running the company from his Palmetto home.

Through word of mouth marketing, the sauce can now be found at independent retailers including the Chop Shop in Bradenton and the Palmetto Meat Shop. Hilker also built an e-commerce website, ebestbarbecue.com.

Hilker is focused mostly on growing his business through wholesale. The sauce retails between \$4.99 and \$5.99 a bottle or \$60 a case. It comes in two varieties, original and killer.

"It's a good sauce; you can tell they put some tender care in it," said Roger Talbot, owner of the Palmetto Meat Shop. "We went through four cases in one week. Once people try it, we'll get even more results."

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