In North Carolina, where and when I grew up, one was inculcated in basketball and barbeque. In our minds, barbeque was divided between east and west, with east being vinegar sauce, and west having some sweetness, ketchup. Both are thin sauces.

Sauces, however, were not so simple. In the 1960s, driving from barbeque place to barbeque place, east or west, no two places were really the same. Often in the East, there would be a little tomato, some spice, but not much sweet. In the West, sauces were usually more sour than sweet, and the slaw was made with that sauce instead of mayonnaise. Most restaurants would have Texas Pete on the table, little peppers in clear vinegar. Many places would have their own sauce in old Texas Pete bottles.

The barbeque sauce of my family was pepper vinegar.
To set the foundation, North Carolina barbeque is pork, whole pigs or shoulders and hams, cooked slowly over wood. Salt and pepper are rubbed on the meat at the start. Sometimes there is a vinegar wash along the way. In the tradition, many restaurants have barbeque chicken, which is likely to have a little red and a little sweet mixed in with the vinegar.

Pepper vinegar is simple. In the growing-up kitchen, there was usually a gallon jug that had been emptied of some of the apple cider vinegar. Cayenne peppers had been put in the jug with the remaining vinegar. It took a year or so to become pepper vinegar. Over time, the lid on the vinegar would rust through, and a little cap of foil would take its place. There was not a lot of preparation and formal preserving.

Here is my somewhat more involved recipe. I have added salt and black peppercorns to the vinegar. Even tried a few bay leaves or wax myrtle. In the end, however, I have settled on only peppers and vinegar.

The best peppers are cayenne, jalapeno, and serrano. The really hot peppers, like habanero, don't have flavor, and they don't cure well.

The peppers can be red or green. Perhaps mythological, the green peppers are considered hotter.

The vinegar is apple cider vinegar. These days, I use organic vinegar. If it is unfiltered, then I let it sit and settle, and I don’t use the bottom layer of sediment.

I use all sorts of jars and prefer jars or nice bottles with a plastic lid or canning jars. (See figure at the top of the article.)

Boil water.

Wash the jars well, and rinse with boiling water.

Wash peppers. Remove any leaves. Remove bad spots.

Place peppers in colander. Pour boiling water over the peppers.

Place peppers in jars. Fill about two thirds to three quarters full.

(Alternatively, place washed peppers in jars. Pour in boiling water. Let sit for a minute. Drain. But, you do have to deal with hot jars.)

Bring vinegar to boil. Pour to about half an inch from the top. Let sit about a minute. Refill to half an inch if necessary. Put on the tops.

If using canning jars, it is likely they will seal. But sealing is not required.

Let sit for a year.
Looking at the picture, below, the vinegar on the right with floating peppers is new. The vinegar on the left is cured and ready. The peppers have sunk. The level of the vinegar has dropped.

I cure pepper vinegar for years. I currently have some seven and eight-year old vinegar that is good. Five years, however, is awfully good and, maybe, as long as it should go.

To be clear, the product, here, is the vinegar – not the peppers. I have seen people go the other way, like the goal was pickled peppers. At times, I do toss the peppers into sauces.

This sauce is not, first and foremost, hot. It is a cure pepper and vinegar elixir.

If you want hot, I suggest crushed dry cayenne or jalapenos simmered in a little oil of fresh peppers chopped.

Once the vinegar is gone, I, sometimes, pour a little more vinegar on the peppers and get some extra life.

This is right on pork, greens, succotash and Brunswick stew; it should mix on the plate with the sweet of the slaw, the broth of the stew, and the pork.

And what about all of those barbeque restaurants opening all over the place. I call them contest barbeques. Lots of meats, lot of sauces – well, some are nice to have around.