

## Bill Ashford: BilyRay's Old Style Gourmet BBQ Sauce

Written by Erin Jerabek Heelan and Shaina Brassard, West Broadway Business and Area Coalition  
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Bill Ashford, Owner of BilyRay's Old Style Gourmet Barbeque Sauce, recently visited the West Broadway Business and Area Coalition (WBC) office and shared a sample of his gourmet sauce, as well as its history.

Upon tasting the incredible sauce, WBC staff realized we would be doing a major disservice to the community if we did not get the word out about this superior product – not to mention its inspiring beginning.

"About two years ago I started having people taste it and got some positive feedback," said Ashford who has produced 185 cases. "The recipe comes from my father. I've been perfecting the taste for over 20 years."



Ashford's father, as a farmhand on a plantation in Holy Grove, Ark., formulated the original recipe from scratch.

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"(My father) used the ingredients that they had around the farm to make the sauce – tomato, onion, syrup, sugar, honey and apple or peach wood for the fire," said Ashford. "The sauce was mainly used with pork meat."

Ashford remembers the sauce and his father's cooking as a tool to create community.

"My father would barbecue beef ribs on the weekends and everyone in the neighborhood came to eat and enjoy that special tasty sauce," said the owner of BilyRay's.

Ashford's family moved to Omaha, Neb. in 1945, and eventually the recipe was handed down from Ashford's father to his brother. In 1973, Ashford moved to Minneapolis and in 1978 he was given the recipe from his brother and has been perfecting it ever since.



Like his father, Ashford has embraced his community and is working hard to establish and grow his brand. In 2011, Ashford cooked at the Phyllis Wheatley Community Center's commercial-grade kitchen. For his latest batch, he worked with Fischer's United Supply in Northeast Minneapolis. Ashford is also connected to the North Minneapolis Business Center, a small business incubator located at 2201 N. 2nd St. The incubator is home to several unique businesses and entrepreneurs.

"The reason I set up this incubator was because when I started my distribution business after a layoff, I could not find a small office with warehouse space," said Dennis Werneke, owner of American Chemical, who started the incubator. "There was plenty of space available if I wanted 10,000 feet or more but nothing small. Thus I realized an opportunity in the making. I said to myself that if the opportunity ever arose, that I would purchase a large building and carve it up into small spaces so that other entrepreneurs would have a chance to get their businesses off the ground."

Werneke connected Ashford to SCORE, an organization that connects volunteers to small

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business entrepreneurs and provides confidential, no-charge business counseling and low-cost workshops. Ashford continues to be optimistic that his business will continue to grow, thanks in part to his new bookkeeper and a business mentor from the Minneapolis chapter of SCORE.

Although Ashford has seen increased success and well deserved recognition with the barbecue sauce, like many entrepreneurs, he continues to work part-time. Ashford is a bus driver for Lorenz Bus Company. He also worked for many years as a commercial artist doing mainly air brush work, but had to give it up after a surgery on his neck left him with diminished sensitivity in his hand.

Grass Roots Gourmet in the Midtown Global Market was the first store to sell his sauces, followed by the EastSide Food Co-op. Now eight different Hy-Vee grocery stores carry the barbecue sauce. In all, people can now find the sauces at 11 stores throughout Minnesota and four in Omaha. On the Northside, So-Low Grocery on Emerson Avenue North keeps it in stock, as does Festival Foods in Brooklyn Center.

For BilyRay's, the proof is truly in the pudding – or sauce. All varieties of the sauce taste amazing because they are made with the utmost care and with all natural ingredients, unlike most barbecue sauces. BilyRay's sauces are not made with a ketchup base, and there is not a single unrecognizable ingredient in them. On all but one occasion, every store owner that has tasted the product has agreed to sell BilyRay's. With any luck, you will soon be able to find it everywhere condiments are sold. Our advice is to get the sauce, and get grilling.

To purchase the sauce directly, or to contact Ashford, call 612-418-8311 or visit his website at [www.bilyraysoldstylebbqsauce.com](http://www.bilyraysoldstylebbqsauce.com).