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# HOT★DOG!

THE STORY OF SMITHFIELD'S FAMOUS FRANKS P.118



*Road Trip*

STARTS ON P.88

## BARBECUE SCIENTISTS

in BENSON

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## NIGHT-SKY MAGIC

11 PLACES FOR STARGAZING

P.66



### CAROLINA-STYLE

*Mustard, chili,  
slaw, & onions ...  
is there any  
other way?*





# Franks for the MEMORIES

Red hot dogs? It's a North Carolina thing. The Big Apple boasts no-frills street-cart dogs lined with mustard and kraut. Chicago packs its dogs with so many ingredients, you can hardly see the meat. But *our* favorite franks are those fire-engine red Bright Leaf dogs made from a secret recipe at a sprawling factory in Smithfield.

*written by* BILLY WARDEN / *photography by* TIM ROBISON







Near the end of the factory line, staffers sort the red hot dogs by hand, discarding any oversize, undersize, or otherwise misshapen franks. The end result (opposite page): a delicious Bright Leaf dog with all the fixin's.



**R**ED. IT'S THE COLOR OF PEAK summer. The wardrobe of sass and flash. Red is speed: the stripe splashed across Richard Petty's classic 1973 Dodge Charger. Red is love: the roses presented to a blushing crush. In the form of an evening gown or a traffic signal, red commands attention. Red wants to possess and consume. Or, in the case of a famously red hot dog, it wants to *be* consumed.

Since 1941, the Carolina Packers meat-processing plant in Smithfield has produced Bright Leaf hot dogs, each pork-and-beef frank bathed in the



**Each pork-and-beef frank is bathed in the radiant red of a particularly rich sunset.**



Kurt Byrd (left) and Kent Denning grew up scarfing down Bright Leaf hot dogs. Now they serve as Carolina Packers' CFO and CEO, respectively.

radiant red of a particularly rich sunset. But the actual moment when a Bright Leaf gets its signature hue is anything but poetic. It happens in a noisy space toward the back of the winding plant. Racks of regular old hot dogs, the color of wet sand, float via an elevated rail track into a steel-plated tunnel, which shakes and shudders like something out of Willy Wonka's fanciful chocolate factory. Inside, red coloring showers down. And finally — *behold!* — the franks emerge in all their shimmering sunburst glory.

Watching the process from the cement floor below is 37-year-old Kurt Byrd. Serious and intense, his official title is chief financial officer, but his duties encompass all manner of chores. Sometimes, Byrd lines up with fellow packers on the concrete loading dock to help box up bags of Bright Leafs for shipment to area grocers,



## DON'T MISS THIS IN Smithfield

### DOUBLE BARLEY BREWING

Sit down for handcrafted ales and food in a space made for the community to enjoy meaningful time together. Featuring an inviting taproom and beer garden, this family-operated brewery specializes in bold-flavored beers with a whole lot of grain. Double Barley lets patrons go behind the scenes of their craft beer-making process in weekly tours.  
**3174 U.S. Highway 70 West**  
**(919) 934-3433**  
[doublebarleybrewing.com](http://doublebarleybrewing.com)

### FRANK CREECH ART GALLERY

This gallery aims to educate and entertain visitors through its culturally diverse fine- and visual-arts programming. With four exhibits every year, the gallery shows an appreciation for various art forms in Smithfield and Johnston County. Lectures and artist workshops throughout the year are part of the gallery's mission to help the local artistic community grow.  
**245 College Road**  
**(919) 209-2112, [johnstoncc.edu/frank-creech-art-gallery](http://johnstoncc.edu/frank-creech-art-gallery)**  
— Rylee Parsons



Double Barley Brewing



In addition to its spicy Red Hots (pictured), Bright Leaf sells bacon, barbecue, bologna, and more.

**“Eating red hot dogs goes so far back that I don’t remember ever *not* eating them.”**

as well as online customers in such far-flung locations as New York, Arkansas, and California. For Byrd, as for many in Johnston County, these wieners are a way of life. “My grandfather worked here,” Byrd says. “For 46 years, starting in the mid ’50s, when he brought home the bacon, he was bringing it from this same plant. That’s why I feel so strongly about being here. It’s a tradition that we’re passing on.”

**HOT DOG FANS THROUGHOUT THE REGION** swear by Bright Leafs with a vigor that’s akin to the way many North Carolinians pledge allegiance to college basketball teams. The franks are associated with everything from church revivals to first dates. “Eating red hot dogs goes so far back here that I don’t remember ever *not* eating them,” says Jeff Holt, the 57-year-old mayor of Pine Level, just 10 minutes east of Smithfield. “It’s a source of pride and identity. We were nursed on ’em.”



## Get Yer Hot Dogs!

Bright Leafs are so popular in Johnston County (JoCo if you're sassy) that the visitors bureau cooked up the Local Red Hot Dog Trail, with many of the choice spots just a jump off I-95.

### OLE TIME GRILL

101 West Wellons Street, Four Oaks

The aptly named Ole Time Grill — originally Thornton's — dates back to 1946 and comes with a wall of vintage photos to prove it. While tucked into one of the tiny hot spot's two booths, you can marvel at a black-and-white portrait of what may be the largest hog ever raised and slaughtered in the area. "He weighed 1,305 pounds," notes grill owner Robert Smith, who estimates that he fries up between 800 and 1,000 Bright Leaf hot dogs a week. "I do homemade hamburgers and lemonade, but Bright Leafs are my main thing," says Smith, who makes good company if you mosey in solo. "They're the best in North Carolina ... according to me."



At Ole Time Grill in Four Oaks, your Bright Leaf hot dogs come with mustard, chili, onions, and fries.

### CRICKET'S GRILL

506 East Market Street, Smithfield

Situated smack in the middle of downtown, Cricket's offers Bright Leafs, other short-order staples, and abundant color. Leaning out the front window of the bright yellow-and-white trailer that houses the walk-up grill, one of the two attendants half-hollers and half-sings to a waiting customer, "Sir, your order's here, baby!" Next to the window, a sign proclaims, "Cricket's: Guilty of having the best hot dogs in town." Another advises "Cash only" — but not to worry, as a well-worn on-site ATM can help. "They need to put a Cricket's in Pine Level," says 74-year-old Joyce Pulley, who regularly makes the 15-minute drive for her Bright Leaf franks fix. Also nearby and well-stocked with red hot dogs are **Millie's** (109 South Brightleaf Boulevard) and **Zack's Char-Grill** (618 East Market Street).

### THE GROCERY BAG

4879 NC Highway 42 East, Clayton

This grill and convenience store is to red hot dogs as Sun Records is to rock 'n' roll: temple for the faithful and a point of pilgrimage for far-flung fans. No fewer than seven weiner workers are required behind the counter to keep up with demand.

The Grocery Bag moves anywhere from 1,000 to 1,500 dogs per day to locals and fresh arrivals alike, according to owner Donna Fitzgerald. "Everyday we see new people coming in, saying, 'We heard you sell red hot dogs,'" she says. And if you suspect that Bright Leaf's base of believers is aging out, think again. Strolling from the busy counter to a booth, Aidan Carpio, 18, totes *four* red hots — all for himself. "Been a rough day," he says with a shrug.

### JONES CAFÉ

415 East Main Street, Clayton

An iconic neighborhood landmark since 1958, Jones Café offers more of a diner vibe, with ownership going back three generations. You can't miss the place: Just look for the mustard yellow building with a black awning and Bright Leaf red hots splashed across its front windows and doors.

### DADDY BOB'S BARBEQUE

333 North Raleigh Street, Angier

While JoCo is Carolina Packers' home turf, it by no means holds a monopoly on red frank fever. Just across the Harnett County line, Daddy Bob's serves up Bright Leafs with an array of toppings, including three kinds of slaw — regular, jalapeño, and barbecue — as well as a rich cheese sauce.

— B.W.



ROBERT SMITH



## “They’re sweeter than an all-beef hot dog. Not candy-sweet, though — they’re tangy.”

Devotees fry the dogs; they grill ‘em, boil ‘em, sprinkle ‘em into casseroles, and even chomp ‘em down raw. In addition to the eye candy of the Bright Leaf’s red hue, these diehards say, the flavor is a treat that your average Oscar Mayer just can’t match. A factory storeroom is piled high with the secret spices that give all Bright Leaf hot dogs — both the company’s line of original red dogs and its shorter, fatter, extra-spicy Red Hots — their tongue-tingling taste. “They’re sweeter than an all-beef hot dog,” says Ashby Brame of the Johnston County Visitors Bureau, which has made the wieners a big part of its marketing pitch. “Not candy-sweet, though — they’re tangy.”

The magic of Bright Leaf hot dogs doesn’t end with the color and the flavor — there’s even the feel of the packaging. Conventional franks come in vacuum-sealed packages, which are designed to prolong the shelf life of the product but have all the charm of an annual report. Bright Leaf originals come loose in bags of 10 or 20. “What’s special about it is not only the look and feel,” Byrd says, proudly hoisting a bag out of a nearby refrigerator and rolling it in his fingers, “but also the air in the bag further cures and develops the seasoning and gives you more flavor.”

**THE BRIGHT LEAF LEGEND BEGAN IN 1939** as an attempt by Johnston County leaders to establish a meat-processing plant that would fire up the economy. To launch the venture, backers tapped John A. Jones, an executive from Georgia, who’d apparently relished a red hot dog in the Savannah area and decided to take the same approach

here — keeping the color but changing the spice mix, which remains Johnston County’s most closely guarded secret.

Two years later, the scarlet links took off, along with an array of other pork products. Today, 15 refrigerated trucks deliver to the coast — where, during beach season, red hot dogs seem in greater demand than sunscreen — and as far west as Hickory. A few Triangle spots carry Bright Leaf hot dogs, too, including Wegmans and Walmart.

Those who grew up wolfing down Bright Leaf’s red hot dogs make eager evangelists, including Byrd. Of the many jobs he holds at Carolina Packers, his favorite seems to be serving samples to curious passers-by at hot happenings like the North Carolina State Fair. Byrd and a colleague unfurl a banner emblazoned with the Bright Leaf logo, then cook up the dogs on a pancake griddle. “We get ‘em good and charred, get a good black streak down ‘em,” Byrd says, his voice rising with excitement. “Then we cut ‘em up and toothpick ‘em for people.”

And that’s when the magic strikes like a screaming red fireball: “When someone tries a Bright Leaf for the first time, the look on their face is priceless,” Byrd says. “Especially folks from up North. At first, they say, ‘It’s really red; I don’t know about this.’ Then they bite into one, and it’s, ‘Wow!’” **Os**

*Billy Warden is a Triangle-based writer, public speaker, band leader, and marketing executive. His work has appeared in the Raleigh News & Observer, The Charlotte Observer, and the Los Angeles Times.*