

## **SHEILA AND WAYNE MUELLER**

### **PERSONAL**

- Born: October 9, 1945 (Sheila); August 27, 1941 (Wayne)
- Hometown: Ottawa, Ill. (Sheila); Chicago, Ill. (Wayne)  
La Crosse residents since 1987
- Married: June 27, 1964
- Children: David, 37; Missy, 36; Jon, 34; 8 grandchildren
- Favorite barbecue sauce: Smoky Recipe (Wayne);  
Grandma's Little Sweetheart (Sheila)

### **EDUCATION**

- Graduates of Auburndale High School, Auburndale Wis.  
Sheila, 1964; Wayne, 1960

### **EXPERIENCE**

Sheila: Waitress; Grocery business; Nursing home and home health care; Grandma's Favorite Recipes

Wayne: U.S. Navy Medical Corps; Surgical Technician; Meat Cutter; Grocery business; Machinist, Chart Industries; Grandma's Favorite Recipes

### **COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT**

- La Crosse County Human Services, Adult Foster Care
- National Association of Women Business Owners
- Bethany Evangelical Free Church



A one-on-one interview with Sheila and Wayne Mueller, creators of *Grandma's Favorite Recipes*.

# the spice of life

Story by Catherine Kolkmeier, photography by Bruce Defries of AVS Group

If you find yourself at a craft fair, you just might pick up the scent of something sweet, maybe spicy, or even smoky. Follow your nose and chances are it will lead you to Grandma and Grandpa—and some of the most wonderful barbecue sauces you'll ever taste.

When Sheila and Wayne Mueller first began making barbecue sauce at home, they didn't know they were stirring up their future. "We used to make hamburger with meat sauce," explains Sheila, "which we called barbecue." They took it to potlucks and served it to guests. After rave reviews from friends and neighbors it became their signature dish.

At first, says Sheila, "I'd make a batch, but it was inconsistent because I just used whatever was in the cabinet." So she bought a large roaster to mix up big batches and can them in quart jars. Sheila's original recipe, known as "Grandma's Little Sweetheart" for its sweet taste, was born.

Wayne was more adventurous. "Wayne's the 'Tim Taylor' of barbecue sauce," Sheila laughs. "He keeps adding more power!" A fan of hickory, he mixed up a batch and called it "Smoky Recipe." By adding spices he created his "Nice 'n Warm" sauce. Today, there are eight flavors of *Grandma's Favorite Recipes*.

But that's getting ahead of the story. You see, barbecue sauce wasn't Grandma's first little sweetheart.

## A musical connection

"I was in the choir," Sheila remembers from her freshman year at Auburndale High School, near Marshfield, Wis. Wayne's father was a music teacher in the area. "My father taught music in local schools that didn't have music programs," says Wayne. Sheila describes how their musical paths finally crossed, "When I was in our Christmas choir, Wayne went up to the director, pointed at me, and said, 'Who is that girl?'"

Sheila's family moved from Ottawa, Ill., to the Marshfield area when she was 6. Her parents, like Wayne's, were farmers. Although they lived in the same area, they went to different schools and didn't actually meet until the summer of 1961. Wayne returned after graduation to play baritone at band camp and found himself sitting behind

Sheila, who was having a hard time with her bassoon. "I literally couldn't put the thing together or take it apart," she says. "It was convenient for me to look helpless and find someone to do it." Enter Wayne. It was an instant attraction and the flirting began. Little did Sheila know he had a girlfriend in the clarinet section.

"He was bringing her, but flirting with me!" Sheila says with a laugh. But Sheila quickly won his heart; he proposed to her on the last day of her junior year before heading to Naval Service at Great Lakes Naval Station in Illinois. It was 1963—a perilous time for a Navy man. Wayne served through Castro's rise and Kennedy's assassination, and Sheila was worried for him. "I had a pretty good idea of what was coming for him," she says, "because he was a medic. He was a Corpsman." But time after time as the Navy sent its men and women to Vietnam, Wayne was kept behind. "We later discovered," Sheila explains, "that the Navy won't let two brothers serve in the same war zone." Wayne's older brother Arland served two tours of duty in Vietnam as a Naval Seabee, but by the time his tours ended the war was essentially over.

Three years earlier on their very first date, Wayne had promised Sheila he was going to marry her someday. On June 27, 1964, just three weeks after her graduation, he made good on his promise. Still in the Navy, he remained at Great Lakes with Sheila for another three years during which their first son, David, was born.

## Finding a home

After the service, the Muellers moved to southern Colorado where Sheila had a sister. After three years there and the birth of their daughter Missy, they felt they were too far away from the rest of their families. While vacationing with family in Wisconsin Rapids, Wis., young David was bitten by a dog. In a conversation with the nursing staff in the emergency room, Wayne mentioned his Navy medical training. They encouraged him to speak with the hospital administrator, who offered him a job, right there on the spot.

Shortly thereafter they moved to Wisconsin Rapids where their second son, Jon, was born. Through twists of fate, they moved many more times over the years. First to Holmen, Wis.,



where Wayne worked as a meat cutter, with later moves including Melrose, Wis., where they owned a grocery store and Spring Grove, Minn., where Wayne worked for Northern Engraving as a machinist. Still, they just couldn't get over their love for the La Crosse area.

### Fate steps in

While living in Holmen, the Muellers joined Bethany Evangelical Free Church in nearby La Crosse. They loved it there; no matter where they lived after that, they couldn't find a church that was comparable. So even while living in Minnesota, they continued to attend church in La Crosse. It was at a progressive church dinner—where guests drive from home to home for each course—that one of Wayne's conversations worked in their favor once again.

They were stuck between courses with no car (their son had borrowed it). Another couple had a car, but no directions for the next stop. Together they traveled to the next home, making small talk along the way. Before long, Wayne found himself invited to the other man's business for an interview as a machinist. The business turned out to be Altec—now Chart Industries—in La Crosse. That was 1987 and Wayne is still working with them today.

In the meantime, Sheila worked a variety of jobs—in nursing homes, waitressing, staying home with the kids—but ultimately found her niche providing home health care through Houston County, Minn. She loved the work, but in 1988 after more than 10 years in the field, she was rear-ended in a car accident and suffered from whiplash. "I couldn't do in-home work anymore," she explains. "Lifting people was too difficult." Sheila was switched to office duties. One day, she got a call that would change the direction of her life. Her position had been eliminated and she was left without a job. She had built a strong sense of faith in recent years and it gave her the strength to move on. "Two years earlier,"

she says, "and I wouldn't have been able to handle that." Sheila learned that because her job was eliminated, she was eligible for job training. At Western Wisconsin Technical College in La Crosse she learned marketing, bookkeeping and other necessary business skills. With her secret recipe in hand, a new business was about to take off.

### A business is born

"We made barbecue sauce on the side for many years," Sheila says, "and took it to area craft shows." At a show, Wayne talked with the state inspector who helped them get a license and a professional kitchen. "Within two weeks of losing my job, I had training lined up and a new kitchen to work in," says Sheila. "The whole thing fell together like dominoes."

From their new kitchen, subleased from Mississippi Brittle, they cooked on Sundays, continuing to sell their sauces at weekend craft shows. When it came time to move, they again contacted the inspector for help. A search led to the old J.C. Penney building in downtown La Crosse, now home to The Elite restaurant.

"On the mezzanine level was a restaurant called The Tea Room," says Sheila. The Muellers used the space for three years, eventually expanding after a neighboring business moved out. With help from their then 9-year-old granddaughter Meghann, Sheila stenciled the walls with flowers and birdhouses. It has been the home of their barbecue sauce business for eight years now.

In 1993, the Muellers gave all their sauces a common brand name—Grandma's Favorite Recipes. "We were doing a bake show at the La Crosse Center and the smell reminded people of their grandmothers' cooking," commented Sheila, an avid collector of old recipes. "Both of our grandmothers died without writing down any of their recipes, and so the name grew from there."





**Roger Roslansky of La Crosse buys his favorite barbecue sauce.**

**Grandma's Favorite Recipes:**

- Grandma's Little Sweetheart – the original**
  - Grandma's Smoky Recipe – hickory flavor**
  - Nice 'n Warm Recipe – as the name implies**
  - Grandma's Bad Boy – more power**
  - Grandma's Smokin' Bad Boy – bold and spicy, mesquite flavor**
  - Grandma's Garlic Recipe – a delicious twist**
  - Grandma's Horse 'n Around – barbecue with a nip of horseradish**
  - Pineapple Glaze – perfect for ham, baking cookies**
- [www.lovetobarbecue.com](http://www.lovetobarbecue.com)

**Spicing it up**

Since 2001, Wayne and Sheila have made, bottled, labeled and sold more than eight tons of their sauces. “No wonder I am tired!” laughs Sheila. Wayne adds, “All we need now is an automatic bottler.” They both agree that bottling is a big job. “We seal the jars by hand—the way Grandma did,” says Sheila. “Grandma’s method is our ‘trade secret’ and allows us to skip the canning process.”

Sheila and Wayne schedule their work so they can make their sauces together. Because of Sheila’s accident, she is not able to bend over to operate the steam kettle. Sheila confides, “I do the dishes while he adds his secret ingredients.”

**The sweet life**

In 1993, Sheila learned she had a condition that indicated she may be developing cancer in her abdominal tract, which is difficult to detect and requires regular screenings. “At that time,” she says, “I was working two part-time jobs I loved, but given this knowledge, Wayne and I had to sit down and ask ‘what do I really want to spend the rest of my life doing?’ I admitted I would rather use my time building this business!” Her disease went into remission and though she is screened regularly, she says, “So far, so good!”

With three grown children and eight grandchildren—one just born this summer—their barbecue business is balanced by time with family. Son David and his wife, Teresa, have two children, Meghann and Matthew, who visit them each summer from Florida. Missy and her husband, Richard, live in the Minneapolis area with their daughter Belle. Son Jon and his wife, Kathy, who live in Fond du Lac, Wis., have five kids: Andy, Melody, Madeline, Simon and baby Jon, Jr. “We now have four of each—boys and girls,” says Sheila proudly, all of whom are planning a visit this Thanksgiving. In the meantime, Sheila makes lots of trips back and forth to keep up with them all.

“We could go year-round,” says Sheila of their show schedule, “but we only have so much energy and the heat saps me.” They no longer do summer shows, but from Labor Day to two weeks before Christmas, they do a show every weekend. Selling at craft shows fits well with their schedule and still leaves time for visits. “We used to do almost every show within 30 miles of La Crosse,” says Sheila, “but we wore ourselves out.” Over the last four years, they’ve taken on larger shows, covering an area that now reaches from Eagle River, Wis., south to Indianapolis, Ind., and west to Des Moines, Iowa. Last year they went to 28 shows, sometimes two in one weekend. “Those are the best ones,” she says.

Accompanying them at shows is their friend Jim, who lives with them through La Crosse County’s Adult Foster Care program. “We’ve all heard of children’s foster care,” says Sheila, “but adults have it, too.” Jim has been part of their family for nine years now. “He is a real people-watcher,” says Wayne, “and loves to go to shows with us. It’s an opportunity that he would otherwise not have had in his life.”

When I left Sheila, Wayne and Jim in their sweet-smelling kitchen, they were bottling jar after jar of “Grandma’s Smoky Recipe.” Boxes of filled jars were stacked to the ceiling in every direction, ready for their first show of the fall at Onalaska’s OmniCenter the second weekend in October. “We still have to cook 13 batches (20 gallons each) of ‘Grandma’s Little Sweetheart’ and all the other recipes too,” says Sheila. It’s hard work getting ready for the fall season, but there’s nothing they’d rather be doing. This is truly the sweet life.

*Catherine Kolkmeier is the owner of Plain English Professional Writing Services ([www.plainenglishwriting.com](http://www.plainenglishwriting.com)). She and Sheila Mueller became friends through the National Association of Women Business Owners (NAWBO) in La Crosse.*