

Barbecue brawls gain in popularity

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Smokestack lightning hit Shelly Hunt out of a clear blue sky.

In Emporia, Kansas, Hunt ate barbecued spare ribs at a little bar, and her life was changed. "I bit on something one day, and I just got addicted," Hunt said.

What kind of person says a plateful of meat has changed their life? Competition barbecue contestants, that's who.

After that plate of ribs in Emporia, Hunt started entering barbecue competitions, which combine elements of cooking, camping and sleep deprivation in search of a champion.

Then in 2007, she opened Desperados Barbecue in Angola, her very own barbecue restaurant.

"Oh, yeah," Hunt said, laughing, as a plume of hickory smoke wafted across her tent in Boston Town Park on Saturday. "I got it bad."

Around her, the Boston Hills Barbecue Festival was perfumed with the scent of cooking pork and filled with tents, recreational vehicles and barbecue pits. Hunt's team and 32 others were matching chicken, ribs, pulled pork and brisket in pursuit of the Grand Champion title and \$1,500 top prize.

"Barbecue has finally made it to New York in a big way," said Hunt.

The Boston Hills event, in its first year, is the seventh New York barbecue contest sanctioned by the Kansas City Barbecue Society, the nation's premier competition barbecue authority. Five years ago, there was one KCBS event in the entire state.

The evangelistic properties of barbecue competitions have been a powerful force in attracting competitors. "People can't believe that dozens of teams would form in the middle of a field to do this," said Tonawanda's Jay Park, captain of the Park Place Pit Barbecue. "Once people get involved in it, you see the camaraderie, the survival of the elements, the taking something and making it great."

“You can’t really explain it,” said Roy Greiner, of the Buffalo Meatheads. “You get there and the smell of the smoke, it just gets you roped in.”

Or as Lackawanna’s Len Zawadzki put it: “It’s guys getting together, it’s beer, it’s smoke, it’s fire. What’s not to like?”

Barbecue brawls, KCBSstyle, are considered fair fights. Everyone starts out even. Before anyone starts cooking, competitors’ chicken, pork and beef is inspected to make sure it’s raw and pristine. Then it’s all about seasoning, skill and timing. Most teams start cooking around midnight, preparing to present entries beginning at noon the next day.

Entries are presented in numbered white Styrofoam boxes. Judges sample and rate the anonymous boxes under the supervision of KCBS officials, who traveled from Massachusetts for the event. “It’s expensive to run a barbecue contest that way, but the good old boy network is not in play,” said organizer Mike Cartechine.

Since the popularity of competitive barbecue has soared in recent years, a New York State championship was created this year, Cartechine said. Competitors who post scores in four of the seven Empire State contests could win \$1,000 or more.

“Teams put \$200 on the line for a chance at the title, and it could be anybody’s day,” said Cartechine. “That’s the beauty of it.”

Smoke, no mirrors

On the grass in Boston Town Park, teams of weekend cooks armed with \$200 Weber Smoky Mountain cookers went head-to-head against semi-pro barbecue gunslingers, guys driving cross-country, contest to contest, in recreational vehicles with custom-built barbecue kitchens.

At her tent, Hunt lamented her spare ribs. “These could have used another 30 minutes,” she said, as she sorted through two dozen sliced ribs, hunting for tender ones to present for judging.

Nearby, a stainless steel cube the size of an elevator car hummed along quietly. Hunt’s electric smoker turns out perfect meat for her restaurant, but she can’t use it in competition. The KCBS rule book says nothing but wood and charcoal, so Hunt has borrowed a 22-inch Weber Smoky Mountain Cooker, which looks like a fat black capsule on legs.

It’s the first time she’s used that smoker, no chance to learn its quirks, and now she was paying for her nonchalance. Her brisket slumped, blackened, on a plate. The chicken wasn’t right either. But Hunt, a competition veteran, shrugged it off.

“It’s not supposed to be a Ron Popeil set-it-and-forget-it thing,” she said. “It’s an art.”

Later that night, Hunt got a new barbecue story to tell. That forlorn-looking brisket? First place, worth \$200. Then hungry barbecue fans bought everything that Desperados cooked.

Kenmore's Torches, led by Nickel City Chef J. J. Richert, and the Buffalo Meatheads also did well in the open grilling competition, Cartechine said. Otherwise, out-of-towners took the top prizes at Boston Hills.

Andy Groneman, from Kansas City, arrived with wife and kids in a motor home, and "Smoke on Wheels" took top honors in barbecue. Groneman came in second overall at last year's American Royal, one of the nation's top contests, with more than 400 teams vying for honors.

Mike Wozniak of "Quau," from Brimfield, Ill., won Sunday's open grilling contest. His kitchen was built into the back of his motor home, customized with a fold-down metal deck built to contain smokers and fiery events. When it was time to turn in the chicken, his wife walked their entries to the judging stand in a quilted bag handmade for the purpose.

But there's more than one way to win at a barbecue competition, said Adam Peterson of Buffalo-based "Up in Smoke." The team competed in Rochester's Roc City Rib Fest in May, finished out of the prizes but still made out.

"We didn't win any money in Roc City, but we did book three catering jobs, just because of the exposure," said Peterson, who operates a catering business called Big Man BBQ. "We're there to compete, but we have to look at it from a business standpoint as well."

Another earned benefit from competing is learning tips from top teams, Peterson said.

Since he started competing, Peterson has tinkered significantly with his method for preparing pork spare ribs. To get the type of sweet glaze that typifies a KCBS-winning spare rib, he started applying layers of brown sugar and granulated honey to the mostly smoked ribs before wrapping them in aluminum foil and returning them to the smoker to finish.

Taking the crown

Some barbecue purists deride the use of foil to steam spare ribs into final-stage tenderness, calling it "the Texas crutch." But you can't argue with the results, Peterson said, as long as you don't leave the foil on for longer than 40 minutes.

"We've picked up a lot of tricks along the way that have made our catering barbecue better."

On Saturday, another part-time caterer, Jay Park, set up his 1,700-pound wood-fired cooker with an integrated two-bay sink and dish rack. At a built-in gas burner, teammate

Pam Zafferin was stirring a pot of reduced apple juice, boiled down into a syrup. It would be used to glaze brisket, along with barbecue sauce, before the Park Place Pit entry was turned in.

Park, Zafferin and her boyfriend Dave Nabb, the third team member, spent five minutes discussing the selection and arrangement of brisket slices in the turn-in container. The goal was to pick the best eight slices from perhaps 10 pounds of barbecued brisket, cooked earlier and waiting in a Cambro warmer.

Zafferin, in charge of presentation, was responsible for using green lettuce or parsley to garnish the meat. Anything else would get the entry disqualified.

The results of their agonizing over fine points was displayed in a glass-fronted trophy case alongside the cooker: Ribbons and certificates from the team's seven-year competition history, including first place in ribs at Oinktoberfest 2004.

After all the work, and spending thousands of dollars a year attending competitions and cooking for the crown of friends he invites, competition barbecue isn't about winning money, Park said.

“For me, it's the whole part of being out there,” said Park. “When I get that trophy or ribbon, it's forever. No one can take it away. There's only one in the whole world, so that means the world to me.”