

Your First Cookoff: How to Make the Jump From Backyard to Competition
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You're a good barbeque cook. You care about your craft. You've studied and practiced and learned. Your family and friends all love your barbeque. It's time to take the next step and enter your first competition! But you don't know how to go about it, and you don't want to do it the wrong way and end up wishing you'd gone golfing or fishing that weekend instead. You wonder what to expect, and you're unsure of the costs and process.

How It Works

Most cookoffs begin Friday afternoon, as teams begin arriving to set up their camp and get their meat checked in. There will be an official Cook's meeting Friday evening; at many cookoffs there is music entertainment, a small fair, or other socializing opportunities. This is often the best part of the cookoff event!

Most teams will light their smokers Friday evening and put their brisket and pork butt on to smoke overnight. Some teams will have team members sleep in shifts so the smoker can be tended as needed throughout the night. Saturday morning, most teams will put their chicken and ribs in the smoker to cook. Preparing the entry boxes with lettuce and parsley can take place anytime Friday or Saturday prior to turning in your entries. It's helpful to get your boxes ready with lettuce and parsley in advance so you aren't time pressured at 11:30 when everything gets into high gear. At 11:30 Saturday morning, it's crunch time as you begin to prepare your first entry, chicken to be at the judging tent at noon. Ribs will follow with turn in at 12:30. pork butt is next with a 1:00 turn-in, finishing up with brisket which is turned in last at 1:30.

Some cookoffs will have additional categories such as sauce, sausage, miscellaneous, etc. Some cookoffs will vary the turn-in times or the turn-in order of categories, but they are the exception. You can turn in your entry five minutes before or up to five minutes after the official turn-in time, any later will result in disqualification.

The judging is normally completed by 2:00, then the judging cards are entered into the computer by the KCBS representative. While teams are waiting for judging results, they will be packing up their gear and getting ready to leave. Generally, the awards ceremony takes place one to two hours after judging has been completed.

When attending the awards ceremony, you will have the opportunity to cheer on your fellow contestants. One of the hallmarks of competition barbeque is the way that all contestants genuinely wish success for the other teams. The air is thick with anticipation, along with a tremendous amount of suspense as teams wait with bated breath to hear the results of their efforts. Still, you will hear many heartfelt "congratulations" and "good Job" from other teams as contestants go up to accept their awards. This is a sport of good sports, and, win or lose, you will always have the well-wishes of the other teams and will be able to extend your good wishes to them in return.

After the awards ceremony Saturday afternoon, most teams head home to get a well-deserved hot shower, a pint of ice cream, and a chance to hash over the results of the cookoff with their teammates. Then it's out to the garage to start cleaning your equipment and begin planning the next cookoff. Sunday, you'll sleep better than you have since you were three. Monday, it's back to the real world where you earn your living and dream

your competition dreams when you're sure no one is looking. After all, you're no longer a serious hobbyist: you've become a real competition cook.

What To Do Before Your First Competition

It's very helpful to attend at least one cookoff as a spectator before you actually enter one. Friday night is an excellent time to meet the teams and ask questions about cookoff participation. You'll find most teams more than willing to share the ins and outs of competition participation, especially on Friday night when they won't be as busy as they are on Saturday. Saturday morning you'll find the teams are often too busy to stop and talk, but if you walk around and keep your eyes open, you will see many exciting smokers and cooking techniques that you can use. Be particularly attentive to the times when the teams are taking their entry boxes up to the judging tent. It never hurts to hang around the judging tent and ask the KCBS rep if there's anything you can volunteer to do. Often you will be put to work and get a lot of information in the bargain.

Another excellent preparation activity is to volunteer to be a judge. This will teach you as much about competition barbeque as any other preparation. There is no qualification required other than loving barbeque, but you may want to take one of the judging classes offered by the KCBS. Don't just show up expecting to judge; call the contest coordinator and express your interest in judging beforehand.

Read and understand the KCBS Rules before you go to the cookoff. The KCBS office can provide you with a KCBS Cook's Handbook that has the rules in it. Study it; know it backward and forward. You will have questions about the rules and the KCBS office will be happy to provide clarification.

Consider only entering one or two categories at your first cookoff. You won't be in the running for Grand Champion and Reserve Champion this way, but you will be able to relax and focus on the one or two categories you've chosen, and it's often more rewarding to ease your way into the rhythm and schedule of competition cooking if you take it slow the first time or two. If there are any "fun" categories offered, do participate in those because they often give a new team its best opportunity for a ribbon.

Choosing Your First Cookoff

A small cookoff near your home is a good first choice. It doesn't have to be a sanctioned contest, but a small sanctioned contest is going to give you the best experience in real-world competition cooking. Look over the KCBS schedule in *The Bullshead*, and contact the contest coordinator to see how many teams they had the year before. If you choose a contest with fewer than 20 teams, you won't feel as intimidated when you arrive, and the KCBS rep will have more time to give you the special "first time team" attention.

Don't go to your first cookoff expecting to win a ribbon; it normally takes several cookoffs to be in the ribbons, but choosing a smaller cookoff for your first time out does increase your chances of winning one of the coveted rosettes that will hang proudly from your rearview mirror on your trip home.

How Many Team Members Do I Need?

Many teams operate successfully with only one or two people. Some teams have four or six or more. Teams can be one person working alone, two good friends, a married

couple, a non-married couple, a nuclear family, several generations of a family, a work-group, or just a group of good friends. But the choice is up to you.

There's no small amount of work and expense in competition barbeque, and spreading the work and expense over a larger group can definitely make getting started easier. Although disagreements among team members about which recipe to use or which technique to employ can make a larger group more difficult. "Too many cooks spoil the batter" can apply if teams aren't completely compatible. The pressure of cookoffs can make this a real problem, so choose your teammates carefully.

Choosing a Team Name

You'll need a team name, so get together with your teammates and agree on one. There are many team names already in use, so check on the internet at www.bbqteamnames.com to be sure you aren't picking something already being used by someone else. Be creative and have fun in picking your team name, but be considerate of other who may be in attendance at the cookoff. There will be families and children there, so you probably don't want a team name that causes a child to turn to his parents and say 'Mommy? What's a (blank)?'

How Much Will I Spend?

Most KCBS cookoffs have a \$100 entry fee. A few are lower and some are higher. You can expect to spend another \$100 for your meat and ingredients and generally another \$100 for miscellaneous items like your own food to eat, lettuce and parsley for your presentation boxes, soft drinks, ice, rubber gloves, etc.

While most teams work with a \$300 total budget per cookoff, some teams spend much more as they pursue special meats from specialty butchers, spices from specialty spice vendors, and other fine tuning tools. There is a story about a team that bought an airline ticket for a brisket they needed flown in for a cookoff. Is that necessary for your first cookoff? No. You can do very well with meat and spices acquired at your local grocery store.

What Can I Win?

Most cookoffs award trophies and ribbons, along with some prize money and sometimes a free smoker or other fun prizes. One cookoff awards lottery tickets as a fun prize!

You will probably begin to win a ribbon or two after you've gotten your feet wet at a few cookoffs. After a couple of years of competition and dedicated study of your hobby, you may begin to win some prize money too. This should be viewed as a way to offset some of your cooking expenses. Focusing on prize money can get your priorities out of order. Instead, focus on cooking your best and learning as much as you can about barbeque and you are sure to win prize money along the way.

Successful teams that have been on the circuit for a number of years report winnings of several thousand dollars per season, which just about covers their expenses for a full season of cookoffs. For the very serious competition cook, there are cookoffs paying up to \$10,000 in prize money for the Grand Champion and up to \$50,000 in prize money overall. These are fun to enter as long as you keep in mind that it takes a lot of practice and cookoffs to win one of "the big ones."

What Do I Need To Bring?

Most importantly, bring your smoker, 2 pork butts, 2 briskets, 12-16 pieces of chicken, and at least three racks of ribs. Bring enough barbeque sauce for all of your entrees, spice rubs and/or marinades to prepare your entries, charcoal and/or wood. You will need to pack all the kitchen utensils and cooking paraphernalia you would use for preparing your entries, such as knives, basting brushes, foil, plastic wrap, dish soap, water, disposable gloves, etc. you must also bring one or two worktables that will become your portable kitchen counters. Don't forget food and beverages for you and your team. Plenty of ice is also a must, as well as soap and water for washing hands and dishes.

What Kind Of Smoker Do I Need?

Many teams compete successfully using several small Weber Smokey Mountain cookers or other small backyard units. You will also hear Weber Smokey Mountains referred to as "bullets" or "WSMs." They are about \$180 at most hardware stores. Some teams will have great big commercial cookers, but don't feel intimidated if you've brought a Weber Kettle and a homemade smoker. World Championships have been won by using such equipment. As one t-shirt so wisely announced, "it's not the size of your smoker, it's the taste of your meat that counts." It is very helpful to have thermometers mounted on your cooking equipment, and some teams will also use thermometers in the meat itself.

Do I Need A Camper?

Some teams have a camper, which can range from a pop-up or truck bed camper to a full 40-foot diesel rig weighing 30,000 pounds or more. Many, many successful teams compete without a camper, so it is not necessary, especially in the beginning. If a camper is available to you, it is handy to have restroom facilities, hot and cold running water, and air conditioning or heat. With or without a camper, you will want to have some type of portable shelter, such as the EZ-Up awnings you will see many of the teams using. Cots or sleeping bags are also helpful, and you will see many people camped out in the back of their SUV's, pick-ups, or other vehicle.

What Kind of People Compete?

Just as you will see pickups and luxury cars parked side-by-side at a revered "Q" joint, so it is with cookoffs where good people from all walks of life gather to celebrate the great sport of competition barbeque. Doctors, teachers, plumbers, business people, electricians, welders, young, old, retired, professional chefs, serious hobbyists you will find a wide variety of people at a cookoff. You do not need to be a professional chef to cook well and win.

Getting a Mentor Team

Some experienced teams are willing to mentor first-time teams at their first cookoff. This can be very helpful to you. While mentor teams probably won't give up all their recipes and competition secrets, they are a valuable resource for getting started. To get a mentor team: Contest reps will ask new teams to stay after the cooks meeting and there will be teams that will stay to help mentor your team.

What Will Happen When I Arrive?

You should arrive at the showgrounds as early on Friday as you can. This can be challenging if you spent Thursday night packing as most teams do. You've stayed up late Thursday and now you're tired and you want to sleep in! When you get to the showgrounds, park and find the contest coordinator or other representative who will be directing you to your cooksite. That person may be able to check your meat right away, or they may send someone else to check in your meat after you've set up. It's handy to have all your competition meat in one ice chest for ease of check-in. Your competition meat must be raw and unseasoned and stored on ice or refrigeration. The check-in person may put a thermometer in the meat to be sure it is no warmer than 40 degrees for safety reasons. You may choose to wash and trim your meats before you arrive at a contest, or you can do it Friday after your meat is checked in. This is up to you.

What Happens After Check-In?

Once you've set up your campsite and gotten your meat approved, it's time to begin cooking. You can marinate or rub your meats according to your recipes and begin to prepare your smoker for cooking. One very important thing that will occur sometime Friday evening is the Cook's Meeting. This is where you will get to meet your KCBS Contest Representative and get some all-important one-on-one coaching from him or her. Just tell the contest rep that it is your first cookoff, and he or she will spend time with you following the Cook's Meeting to be sure you understand the rulebook and answer any questions you might have.

How is the Judging done?

At the Cook's Meeting you will receive Styrofoam boxes that you will use to put your entries in the next day. The boxes will have a number on them that corresponds to your team.

Prior to turn in time, you will place at least six pieces of meat in each container, along with lettuce and parsley as decoration. It is very helpful to practice your presentations at home before the cook off using 9x9 styrofoam take-out containers. It is also very useful to put more than six pieces of meat in each box. This can make your box look more attractive, as well as giving extra meat for the table captains and other volunteers to sample. Be sure you cut completely between each piece of meat, because two pieces that aren't cut completely through only count as one piece. At turn in time, you will not see the judges and they will not see you. You will turn your entry box over to a representative who will carry it to the judging tables. Your entry will be judged "blind" using a number that is assigned to your team and written on the top of your box. This number is then swapped with a second number known only to the KCBS representative. It doesn't matter who you are at a KCBS cookoff; the awards are given only according to how well the judges like your food. Your entry will be judged by three criteria; appearance, taste, and tenderness/texture. Each of six judges will award you a score from 1-9 for each of the criteria. The taste score is doubled so it counts as approximately half your score. Appearance and tenderness/texture account for the rest of the score. Consult your KCBS handbook for the precise mathematical multipliers that are applied to the scores.

Now What?

After reading this article, you now have all the information you need to enter the exciting and rewarding sport of competition barbeque cooking. Turn the page, find the upcoming events, and pick one. It's that easy. Gather your team, gather your meat and equipment, and c'mon out. Competition barbeque is even more fun than you've imagined. It's a fabulous hobby for married couples that long to find an activity they can enjoy together. It's a wonderful undertaking for families looking to spend more quality time with one another in this hustle and bustle 21st century. It's an excellent team-builder for work groups, and a fabulous way for social friends to keep their relationships strong. It's also a wholesome, all-American sport that anyone can do well. If you love barbeque and you love to cook, competition barbecue is for you.

See you down the road.

Basic Cookoff Pack List

- Aluminum Pans
- Aprons
- Ash Bucket
- Aspirin
- Awning/Tent
- Band-Aids
- Barbeque Rub
- Barbeque Sauce
- Batteries
- Bedding
- Beer
- Bleach
- Briskets
- Brushes, sauce
- Burn Cream
- Butter
- Cell Phone
- Charcoal
- Charcoal Chimney
- Chicken
- Clothing
- Cups, plastic
- Dish pans
- Dish rags
- Dish soap
- Duct tape
- Dust masks
- Fire Extinguisher
- Fireman's Rubber Gloves
- First Aid Kit
- Flashlight
- Foil
- Food for meals
- Hot pads
- Ice
- Ice Chests
- Insect repellent
- Juice
- Kitchen Disinfecting Wipes
- Knives
- Lawn Chairs
- Lettuce
- Lighter
- Marinade
- Matches
- Measuring Cups
- Measuring Spoons
- Newspaper
- Oven Mitts
- Pam
- Paper towels
- Parsley
- Plastic Forks
- Paper plates
- Pork Butts
- Pots and Pans
- Propane Stove
- Rain Coats
- Ribs
- Rubber Gloves
- Saran Wrap
- Sauce Pans
- Shoes
- Shovel
- Smoker
- Soap
- Soda Pop
- Spatulas
- Spoons
- Spray Cleaner
- Sunscreen
- Sunglasses
- Tablecloth, plastic
- Thermometers
- Tire Gauge
- Tongs
- Tools
- Toothpicks
- Towels
- Trash Bags
- T-Towels
- Water
- Widebrim hats
- Wood

- Work Tables
- Zip-Loc Bags