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Barbecue cookoffs serve up heaping portions of fun

BY David Latt

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With bargain-hunters looking for deals far and wide, barbecue cookoffs are growing in popularity. During the summer, just about every state features a cookoff. Some are small-town affairs, while others, like the four-day Great American Rib Cookoff in Columbus, Ohio, attract 1 million people.

Most don't charge admission. Live music and crafts fairs are part of the entertainment. There's plenty to eat and drink. The most expensive plate of food is under $15. For families, couples on a date and groups of friends, a cookoff is an affordable, fun way to spend the day.

From Memorial Day to Labor Day, barbecue pitmasters criss-cross the country in big rigs, driving their mammoth smokers and barbecue grills from New York to Nevada, Florida to Ohio, Texas to Kentucky. They move from competition to competition, selling their meats, sauces and dry rubs, going up against longtime competitors, and (hopefully) picking up a few trophies along the way.

But even if they don't win, this is big business.

Only a few of the cookers - don't call them "chefs" - have restaurants. Most make their living catering and competing on the cookoff circuit. In a down economy, while their catering businesses have taken a hit, this year they've made as much or more money on the circuit, many of them say.

Alexander Lupinetti, better known as Butch, is typical of the competitive pitmasters. Like many cookers, his business is a family affair. The Mount Laurel, N.J., native loads up his rig right before Memorial Day and hits the road with a crew of seven, including his wife, Lynne, son, Shane, and daughter, Alyson.

Among the cookers, Lupinetti is famous not only for the dozens of awards he has won but also for beating celebrity chef Bobby Flay in one of his "Throwdown" challenges, televised on the Food Network.

Recently, I had the chance to observe a cookoff up close as a judge at John Ascuaga's **Best in the West Nugget Rib Cook-Off** in Sparks, Nev., the largest competition west of the Mississippi.

Over six days, the Nugget attracted 500,000 people who come to watch 24 cookers compete in the rib cookoff. There are families everywhere you turn. Toddlers in strollers. Teenagers who might not otherwise hang out with their parents are happily comparing notes about a favorite rib cooker or a dynamite sauce.

"People are staying local, enjoying themselves," said Virginia Beach's Dan Johnson, owner of Johnson's BBQ. "The cook-offs are good for families. There are things for dads to do, moms too, and the kids get to play."

The Nugget adds to the fun with bands playing day and night in the desert town's historic Victorian Square. The sound of rock and country music drifts through the air, combining with the sweet smoke that wafts off the wood-burning grills as the racks of ribs are coated with thick brush-strokes of barbecue sauce.

Impromptu picnics happen as people eat their ribs as soon as they've paid for them. Others find space on the picnic benches that have been set up in the shade. They'll eat a basket of ribs. Lick their fingers. Grab an ice-cold lemonade. Walk around a bit. Listen to the music, maybe gamble a bit, then they're back out to the midway to try another cooker's ribs.

The toughest part about being a judge is the waiting. The first rule of the contest is that no judge may eat a rib until the judging.

Walking past all the different cookers - their hickory and oak logs burning red hot under the grills, the smell of barbecue sauce and smoke in the air - is pure torture. But I'm true to my judge's oath and I wait.

When the time comes, the judges meet in a secured room inside the casino. Chafing dishes filled with ribs are placed on the long tables. The cookers are identified only by number.

The second rule of judging is "No talking." In 40 minutes, each judge has to evaluate either 12 (the preliminary round) or 10 (the final round) ribs. Walking around the chafing dishes, we solemnly nibble on a bone, evaluating each rib for appearance, tenderness, mouth feel and taste (salty, sweet, and heat).

Some ribs I like right away. Others I'm convinced aren't as good. I know that a cooker shouldn't be judged on one rib alone, so it's back around the table for a second tasting. I score each one, then go back a third time to confirm my favorites. I'm dying to know which cooker made which ribs, but all I know is a number.

After the judging, we're invited to a special area where the cookers bring their ribs to a large tent so it's easier to try everyone's ribs and sauces. Now I have the chance to put a face to a rib. I methodically take one rib from each serving dish (if you're keeping track that's 24 ribs) and carefully write on the Styrofoam plate the name of the cooker. I take a bite out of each one but only eat the whole rib if it's great.

By the end I think I have a pretty good idea which cookers made my favorite ribs. I keep it to myself because the results of the contest aren't announced until the following day.

When I go to bed that night, I go to sleep happy. In four hours, I've eaten 30 ribs.

After about an hour, I wake up with terrible chest pains so bad I am convinced I am dying. I know I should call the front desk and ask them to call an ambulance, but the pain is intense, I can't move a muscle.

Then I realize I'm not having a heart attack. It was heartburn. But it was worth it.

*David Latt, an Emmy Award-winning producer, writes **a travel and food blog**.*