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AHEAD

Barbecue's Main Events

By AUSTIN CONSIDINE

SUMMER is winding down, but there's still plenty of sizzle left in the grill. Right up to Labor Day and beyond, crowds will be clustering around monster cooking pits and savoring the smell of sweet, smoldering mesquite at some of the year's biggest barbecue festivals.

The food is the main event — whether Kansas City-style beef brisket or Southern-style pork shoulder, with barbecue chefs competing for the dollars of the hungry festivalgoers as well as for prize money and bragging rights. Admission to some festivals is free; at others, there's a fee of $10 or less. In either case, count on paying a little extra to put the barbecue on your plate.

Live music draws the masses, too. Darius Rucker, singer and guitarist for Hootie and the Blowfish, who have headlined the Rib America Festival in Indianapolis for three years, said he always enjoys playing at this kind of event.

At Rib America, which is held around Labor Day, crowds are huge. "We played last year and the year before, and there were like 70,000 people there," Mr. Rucker said. "Even when you play a stadium, you don't get that kind of crowd."

Jon Bigalk, chief pit master of Willingham's World Champion BBQ in Memphis, said he hoped to earn about $60,000 in sales at this year's Rib America. Mr. Bigalk barbecues in the traditional Memphis style, which partly means cooking over a pit of hickory and oak, not apple wood or peat (or mesquite), customary smoking fuels in some other regions. And although many chefs serve their barbecue slathered in sauce, his is cooked dry, meaning with a rub of spices only. Sauce is served on the side.

Competitive spirits like Mr. Bigalk's make these festivals a good bet for barbecue fans. "We're striving for that feedback from people," he said. "Typically at festivals, it's the people's choice awards that we're going after. We know we're putting out the best product that we can when we win that award."

The Sloss Furnaces Stokin' the Fire BBQ Festival in Birmingham, Ala., next weekend will include a competition, approved by the Kansas City Barbecue Society, for professionals and amateurs that will award $20,000 in cash, and prizes. Musical acts will include headliners like the singer and songwriter Alejandro Escovedo and Southern Culture on the Skids.

The size of barbecue festivals can be staggering. The Best in the West Nugget Rib Cook-Off, in Sparks, Nev., will run for six days ending on Labor Day and last year drew more than half a million people, who consumed more than 100 tons of ribs, said Mike Traum, public relations manager for John Ascuaga's Nugget Casino Resort, which holds the event.

As many as 50,000 people may show up each day at bigger festivals to decide whose pit to sample, said Jerry

Gibson, co-owner and founder of Pigfoot BBQ Company in West Salem, Ohio, and a competitor on the barbecue circuit. Part of what wins over crowds and judges, he said, is adapting the flavor to regional tastes.

On his home territory in Ohio, he said, the preference is for “sweet and mild,” but in New York State “they like something with a little more kick to it.” And in the South, vinegar is a strong component. “I don’t know if they wean their kids on vinegar from the time they’re born or what,” Mr. Gibson said, “but they sure like their vinegar sauces down there.”

Mr. Rucker, of Hootie and the Blowfish, is a native South Carolinian, and while he was growing up there, he said, barbecue was always a big treat. Apparently it still is.

“You go to the Rib Fest and it’s just all about barbecue,” he said. “We get there pretty early, and you just sit around all day sampling as much barbecue as you can get. Oh yeah.”

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