

Culinary Travel: Best in the West Barbecue



As we shift from backyard barbecues to parking lot tailgating fêtes, David Latt recounts his end-of-summer days judging the Best in the West Nugget Rib Cook-Off.

Find out where competitive barbecue masters like to eat when they're on the road, and what happens when you eat 30 ribs in four hours.

In a down economy where the [restaurant](#) business is suffering, the cook-off business is booming.

The reason? Only a few grill masters have restaurants and most of them make their living doing catering and traveling the competitive barbecue circuit—criss-crossing the country in big rigs, pulling mammoth smokers and barbecue grills. Even if they don't win, competitions are big business as cookers build their brands and sell their meats and sauces along the way.

For more sticky, smoky goodness, don't miss [David Latt's Ribs, Ribs & More Ribs: The Biggest Barbecue Cook-Off in the West](#).

From the consumer's perspective, there are few other [family-friendly activities](#) that offer so much fun for so little money.

Recently, I returned to my role as judge at John Ascuaga's Best in the West Nugget Rib Cook-Off. Now in its 21st year, the Nugget's six-day rib-cook attracts more than 500,000 people—that's right, half a million visitors there to enjoy the gastronomic festivities.

There are families everywhere you turn with toddlers in arms and babies 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.

There's no admission fee. The entertainment is free. Everyone is welcome to stop and listen to bands, and at the Nugget, the sound of rock and country music drifts through day and night.

Looking for some great places to visit to sample fantastic barbecue? Don't miss our [Off the Brochure Travel Guide to Kansas City](#) as well as the [Off the Brochure Travel Guide to Nashville, Tennessee](#).



Confusingly, there may be people in PETA T-shirts, but the fine print explains it all: At a rib cook-off, PETA means "People for the Eating of Tasty Animals."

Imagine a midway that looks very much like a county fair only instead of having rides, baking contests, and pens with animals, everyone is selling meat: pork ribs, beef ribs, brisket, turkey drumsticks, barbecue chicken, pulled pork, and hot links.

Sweet smoke pours off the wood burning grills as the racks of ribs are coated with thick brush-strokes of barbecue sauce.

OK, not everyone is selling meat.

There are also sides that go with meat: cole slaw and baked beans and lots of fried things—thick fried onion rings, zucchini strips, hush puppies, garlic fries, and potato chips piled high on a plate looking very much like a small mountain.

For those watching their diets (not likely in this atmosphere), there is fresh fruit on a stick and freshly squeezed lemonade. For something sweet, booths sell fennel cakes, [shaved ice](#) and chocolate dipped fruit on sticks.



Best of all, the most expensive plate of food costs less than \$15.

But people who come to a rib cook-off don't come for a quick bite. Not a chance. They've come to sample and compare.

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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.



Odds are, the attendees aren't first-timers. In fact, they most likely come back year after year to enjoy the ribs from their favorite cookers.

The conversations you'll hear down the midway are all about ribs and sauce, not to mention the barbecue gossip circuit: which cookers are at the top of their game; whose meat has the best balance of smoke and tenderness; which rib has just the right edge of heat; comparisons between old favorites and new ones.

The cookers are as enthusiastic about ribs as are the fans. These are the guys who live, breath, and sleep dry rubs, sauces and quality of meat. Of the 24 cookers in competition, 23 are on the road four months of the year.

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At the Best in the West, Butch of Smack Your Lips BBQ is a crowd favorite because he beat Bobby Flay on the Food Network's rib Throwdown. There are long lines in front of Rasta Joe's because who can resist barbecue with [Jamaican flavors](#) and heat?

Last year's winner for best ribs, Bone Daddy's Bill Wall, has so many fans that he sends Facebook updates and Twitter posts to let folks back home know what's happening each day at the cook-off.

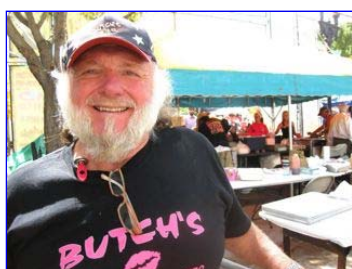
So where do the big guys like to eat when they're on the road?

Butch eats ribs from old friend Ray "Red" Allen Gill's Razorback, stopping by Red's place in Arkansas and when they're at events competing against one another.

Peter and Roberta Rathmann of BJ's Nevada Barbeque Company—the only Sparks barbecue restaurant at the competition—prefer small, family-run operations when they travel because they want to see what people like themselves are doing.

Joe Alexander of Rasta Joe's likes Corky's in Memphis, Tennessee for the pulled pork and ribs.

Want a culinary treat? Check out an [Unexpected Foodie City: Houston, Texas](#).



But surprisingly, what most cookers recommend isn't what you'd think.

Most agree with Bill Wall who says, "The honest truth is I don't eat a lot of barbecue. I love to visit and see barbecue places [when traveling]. But when I'm going out to eat, I like Caesar salads and shrimp, a good pasta, or a great piece of meat."

Unlike Bill and the other cookers, I rarely get the chance to eat great ribs and I love them. So being a judge at the Best of the West is a treat.

The tough part, though, is the waiting. The first rule of the contest is that no judge may eat a rib until the judging.

Want more food festivals? Read [10 Culinary Festivals for the Gourmet Traveler](#).

Walking past all those cookers, their grills ablaze, the smell of barbecue sauce and smoke in the air, is pure torture. Watching crowds of people eating baskets of ribs and licking thick, sweet sauce off their fingers, it takes all my self-control so I don't just reach over and grab one of those ribs and devour it on the spot.

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. The ribs are put out on a large table. The cookers are identified only by number.

The tasting begins in hushed silence. 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 good. But in fairness 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 I go back a third time to confirm my favorites. I'm dying to know who I like, 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, so 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 tomorrow.

When I go to bed that night, I go to sleep happy and very full. In four hours, I've eaten as many as 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 so intense, I can't move a muscle.

Then I realize I'm not having a heart attack; it's heartburn. You can't eat that many ribs and not pay the price.

But it's worth it.

By David Latt for PeterGreenberg.com. Visit David on the Web at MenWhoLiketoCook.com and on the [New York Times](http://NewYorkTimes.com)' "[Bitten](http://Bitten.com)" blog.