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Labor Day weekend means barbecue ribs in northern Nevada

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By Scott Sonner, Associated Press

SPARKS, Nev. — The sweet, smoky haze wafting across Interstate 80 on Labor Day weekend comes from a string of two dozen barbecue stands cooking up their creations on the edge of the Sierra Nevada.

But the secret recipes for the dry rubs and sauces arrive from all over — Texas, Chicago, Oregon and Arkansas — with some of the best grill masters in the world who gather at the "Best in the West Nugget Rib Cook-Off."

A record 148,000 pounds of St. Louis-style pork ribs were devoured last year by some 300,000 visitors who washed them down with fresh-squeezed lemonade and regional ales while listening to free music on five stages in Sparks, Reno's smaller next-door neighbor.

RELATED ITEMS

- **Best in the West Nugget Rib Cook-off:** Sept. 1-5, Victorian Square, Sparks, Nev.; www.nuggetribcookoff.com or (800) 648- 1177.

For help in planning a trip to Sparks, visit www.travelnevada.com or call (800) 638-2328.

From Sept. 1-5, six city blocks again will be closed to traffic and the cookers — don't call them chefs — will stoke their red-hot smokers with hickory, alder and cherry wood at the 17th annual festival at Victorian Square.

This year's entertainment includes .38 Special, Paul Thorn and Collin Raye. There are 125 arts and crafts booths to peruse, a children's carnival play area and large interactive fountain in front of a theater complex plaza where young and old alike cool off between finger lickings.

But make no mistake, the stars are the ribs, which technically are called "bones." As in the $5 sampler, with three bones. Or the half rack for $10 (typically eight bones) or the full rack, typically 16 bones for $18.

The best advice for newcomers? Bring a crowd.

The more people, the cheaper it is to sample a variety of cooking styles and regional flavors. A group of four can buy a full rack each at $18 and divide them, whereas one person would have to buy four different three-bone samplers to get the same tastes.

Another strategy is to use geography as a guide, alternating between the Southerners who tend to use thinner, vinegar-based sauces and the Northerners who stick to thicker, sweeter sauces.

This year's lineup includes Texas Outlaws Barbecue from Elizabethtown, Ky., which took the top prize last year, and a pair of regulars in Bone Daddy's from Midland, Mich., a favorite among the sweet tooths, and Razorback Cookers of Blytheville, Ark., strictly "Memphis style" with the vinegar base.

The owners of the North Main Barbecue in Euless, Texas, who compete as the Sweet Meat Cooking Team and sport a large grill shaped like an armadillo, haven't missed the event since winning the inaugural title in 1989.

Lines get long at night so it's best to visit past champions and other favorites during the afternoon and spend evenings sampling some of the newer, undiscovered stands.

The hardest part can be convincing members of your crew to try something new once they've gotten hooked on a favorite.

Most competitors sell bottles of their own barbecue sauce and some hawk souvenirs, like T-shirts that say "PETA." Not to be confused with the animal rights group People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, these shirts are worn by "People for the Eating of Tasty Animals."

The 2005 lineup of 24 cookers already is set. Sponsors say it's possible someone will cancel, but they recommend rookie rib cookers visit the event once before entering.

"This is not an event for the meek and recreational rib cooker. This is hard work," the Nugget's Web site warns.

"You wake up early, go to bed late and wake up again the next day ready to serve your customers with a great attitude and a smile on your face."

Not to mention barbecue sauce from ear to ear.

A final tip: Don't forget some moist towelettes or a wet wash cloth in a plastic bag. Yes, paper napkins are provided. No, they don't do much good.

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