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David Qualls (white shirt), Tecemseh, Okla., earned the Grand Champion award at the United Wireless Five State Fair Barbecue Cook-off, and Jeff Brown (black and gray striped shirt), Enid, Okla., won the Reserve Grand Champion Award. L&T photo/Earl Watt

By EARL WATT

• Leader & Times

Barbecue enthusiasts from television personalities to first-time competitors came to Liberal to compete in the Second Annual United Wireless Five State Fair Barbecue Cook-off.

Grillers used a variety of wood or charcoal burning cookers in an effort to impress the judges and earn a share of more than \$7,000 in cash and prizes.

In the end, the American Dream Barbecue Team from Tecumseh, Okla., with David Qualls as the head cook earned the Grand Champion title while Wildcatters Q Crew from Enid, Okla., took the Reserve Grand Champion award.

Cooks had to prepare chicken, pork ribs, pork butt and brisket.

For many, Liberal was another stop on a circuit that has more than 9,000 teams competing in the Kansas City Barbecue Society's competitions that have been featured regularly on the television show, "BBQ Pitmasters."



Jeff Brown, the head cook of the Wildcatters Q Crew, said that the Liberal competition improved over last year and should continue to be a stop on the calendar for his team.

"The competition this year was tougher than last year," Brown said. "That is the way it should be. There were several good teams in there. Next year it will be even bigger. We are going to try to get more Colorado teams, and in its second year with 25, that gets it over the hump."

Brown cooks in about 30 contests a year, as do many of the other competitive cooks, and he said that he has learned a great deal since his first competition in 2005.

"The first one was not so good," he said. "There is a lot to understanding competition barbecue. I had a baseball mitt for my brisket and the chicken wasn't too good, either."

Today, the Wildcatters are ranked third in the nation in chicken and fifth in the nation in brisket.

Brown set a KCBS record earning three perfect scores for his chicken at three different contests.

Brown sold Traeger grills at his oil and gas business in Enid and decided to enter. Since then, he has switched to a gravity fed smoker with charcoal and wood in the firebox that is controlled with a guru fan. Overnight, the grill is under constant monitoring, and if the temperature varies, an alarm will sound, and Brown will be able to make adjustments.

Next week, Brown will be in Woodward, and then he will go to Bedford, Texas for a major contest.

While some may be tempted to give competitive grilling a try, Brown said nothing will happen until you enter.

“Get out there and cook,” he said. “There is a lot of information on the Internet. Barbecue forums have an archive section, and questions they may have on competition meats, you can see how they were answered. Also on Tuesday nights, there is a radio show which you can call in and ask questions — Ray Lampey’s barbecue show. You can listen to that live on the internet.”

He also said that competition cooks are also willing to help newcomers joining the competition — to a point.

“We won’t give our recipes of course, but we will help them out as much as we can,” Brown said. “Some of your better cooks, like Four Legs Up in Great Bend, puts a cooking school on a couple of times a year. It’s \$400 to get into it. He will teach you the basics of competition barbecue.”

Event organizer Jim Rice said plans are already under way for next year’s contest, and one addition being considered is a People’s Choice Award so that fairgoers have a chance to taste

some of the best barbecue in the nation.

Rice also thought it was good for the fair and the community to bring in some of the top teams from around the country. The contest kept with the tradition by having teams from five different states at the Five State Fair.

“Thanks to the Seward County Fair Board for allowing us to be part of the Fair,” Rice said in a release. “They provided us space, and we provided new attendees and a new event for the fair.”

Rice also pointed out that many of the teams also made meat purchases and also fueled their vehicles as well as visited some of Liberal’s attractions including the Mid-America Air Museum and the Land of Oz and Dorothy’s House.

The event requires cooks to check in on Friday for the event that takes place Saturday.

Not only do the teams descend on the community, but KCBS officials as well as KCBS certified judges also come to Liberal, adding to the economic impact for the event.

The cook-off is much like other fair contests where entries are for judges only. For example, the public doesn’t get to sample cookies from the cookie jar entries or other food products, but due to the high demand to sample the barbecue, Rice said that next year’s contest will allow that option.

Although it does allow the public to get to taste some of the best barbecue in the nation, Brown said it has to be done right to make sure it does not interfere with the contest.

“We don’t have time to talk to a lot of people during the contest,” he said. “It’s not that we are rude, but we have a lot of money wrapped up here, and we don’t have time to talk about it until it’s over.”

Much like any competitor, like a football player during the game, cooks are focused on their entries and not in talking to spectators.

And the investment is substantial.

“Some people think we are being rude,” he said. “We aren’t, it’s just we can’t visit during the competition. Before or after is fine.”

There may also be a kids barbecue challenge next year, but Rice said that the planning was still preliminary.

The contest was highly rated by KCBS officials and is expected to become a local tradition.

“I think the word will spread,” Rice said. “We could have as many as 30 to 35 teams next year.”

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