

# No Bribing, Just Barbeque

I rose to my feet, legs wobbly from the weight of the fatigue and pork fat and reeking of smoke. My right hand went up and I swore the solemn oath with all the gusto I could dredge up: "... to objectively and subjectively evaluate each barbeque meat that is presented to my eyes, my nose, my hands and my palate. I accept my duty to be an official KCBS-certified judge so that truth, justice, excellence in barbeque and the American way of life may be strengthened and preserved forever."

I could taste my dream now: judge at the Pennsylvania State Championship BBQ Cook-off. It's the centerpiece of the annual New Holland Summer Fest, which is held out near Lancaster. This year's edition will take place August 22 and 23 and will feature 72 teams from eight states and Canada. A quaint backyard party for bragging rights among neighbors, this is not. They'll compete over all the staples: chicken, pork, pork ribs, brisket, sausage, a whole hog and an ominous-sounding "chef's choice." (Three of the teams will be selling to the public too.)

As much as you may envy me right now, consider this: If I eat just an ounce of every serving, I'll have *three* pounds of barbeque squatting in my belly by the day's end.

The oath was the culmination of a very official class that was held at Meadow Creek Welding, in New Holland. The name is a bit deceptive. Meadow Creek, lo and behold, makes some serious grills, roasters and smokers. It also runs a Kansas City Barbeque Society-certified judging school. When I mailed in my registration form and check (it's old-school), I imagined being one of maybe 15 others who discovered a magical loophole: Be fed competition-worthy barbeque all day long? OK, sure. But I found a far more elaborate scene when I got there.

My assigned seat was in a distant corner of an expansive warehouse between two large guys who were clearly well-versed in our subject matter. In all, there were about a hundred of us.

I should have known better. It's not like this was some kind of underground barbeque club. The Kansas City Barbeque Society is the largest competitive barbeque organization around. It counts more than 19,000 members among its ranks and sanctions over 450 cook-offs a year around the world, a bunch of which have shown up on episodes of "BBQ Pitmasters" and "BBQ Pit Wars."

We ate well, of course. But too much of my morning was devoted to squinting at a projection screen and trying to absorb a laundry list of rules. So many rules. I did learn a few things, like a rib is properly cooked when it pulls off the bone easily where the bite's taken, and only then. If it sticks, it's undercooked. If the whole thing falls off, it's overcooked.

The underlying theme, though, was that judging a barbeque competition is a matter of personal taste. So a lot of our schooling centered on teaching us how to be consistent in our opinions. This is where I realized that I didn't think my plan through. Until then, I'd never managed anything more than a grunt after shoveling down a plate of barbeque. It was like learning a new language, but one that's spoken in a country I'd visited every summer since I was a kid.

**The Pennsylvania State Championship BBQ Cook-off** at the New Holland Summer Fest, Aug. 22 and 23, New Holland, PA; [nhsummerfest.org](http://nhsummerfest.org).

In the proud tradition of those who can't turning to judging, our resident glutton, **Mike Madaio**, works the system to win a coveted front-row seat at the state barbeque championship.

EATS. SIDE ORDER

