

Becoming a KCBS Certified Barbecue Judge By Keith Robinson

Barbecue judging is a strictly volunteer effort. As the number of sanctioned events has grown over the past few years, many bbq teams and organizers have realized the value of being evaluated by judges with some training on the fundamentals of BBQ cooking and tasting. There are several barbecue sanctioning organizations – Memphis in May, Florida BBQ Association, Central Texas Barbecue Association, etc. The main one in the USA is the Kansas City Barbecue Society (KCBS) which strictly uses blind judging – the judges do not know who cooked what, when or where. To become a Certified KCBS Barbecue Judge requires being over 16 and attending a 5-hour class on BBQ judging. Classes are held throughout the USA and may be located on the KCBS website, www.kcbs.com. Contact the location desired for class availability and cost. I attended one held during the Foothills Country Fair in Cleveland, Tennessee, on June 27, 2012. The event was headed by Louie Alford, the class was led Don Harwell, a well respected Master Judge. I paid a fee of \$85 that included the class and a one-year membership in KCBS. Because each KCBS judging table has 6 judges, classes are filled 6 at a time; there were 60 attendees in my class – some were bbq team members, some bbq restaurant owners, some just loved bbq.

A list of KCBS sanctioned events is also on their website. There are 20,000 KCBS certified judges in the USA. Well, actually now there are 20,001. To be a judge at an event however is strictly up to the event organizer, not KCBS. While being a judge is voluntary, there are some perks. The two times I have been a judge, I received a good parking spot near the judging area, a snappy day-glo wrist band which got me in free to the event and more great barbecue to eat than anybody deserves.

The required 5-hour class was split into two parts, the first half was a presentation by Mr. Harwell of different aspects of KCBS sanctioned judging – BBQ is judged on appearance, taste and tenderness/texture (sauces are not judged). He covered what was and was not allowed to be part of the appearance – lettuce is, kale isn't. What are the meat categories? They are chicken, pork ribs, pork shoulder and beef brisket. There were numerous Q&As, some slides and short movies and some discussion of which cooking equipment the teams are allowed to use.

The classes are usually held in conjunction with BBQ events for the simple reason that the second half of the class is 'hands on', requiring the presentation to attendees of over 200 entrees in the four different judging categories – and someone has to cook it. We were asked to be faux judges using the official forms and following all the relevant KCBS rules. To keep taste buds fresh, judges have saltines and water for use between tastings. Conversation among the judges was limited as we focused on what was uniformly excellent quality bbq and questions were freely asked and answered. A few red herrings (e.g., kale) were tossed in and caught by some (though not by me – green is green).

On June 28 I woke up to my first day as a KCBS Certified Barbecue Judge and, as everyone in the South knows, once you have received an honorary title, it is yours for life. No need to address me as Your Honor, just call me Judge Keith.

Having worked with a number of events over the years, I have found that there is only one real general rule – and this applies to all vendors as well – whatever is going on at the event, whatever you are asked to do, be polite and be part of the solution not the problem, or you will not be invited back nor will you deserve to be.