

Blazin Hog BBQ

New Judges Overview

In preparation for judging a barbeque contest, this article is intended to explain to new judges how a barbeque contest is judged. Those of you who have judged contests before can consider this a refresher course on the art of being a barbeque judge.

We'll begin by looking at how the judging area is set up; explain how the judging works, and what is expected of each judge.

Next, we'll look at the three critiques each judge will make on the meat samples presented: Appearance, Tenderness, Texture and Taste.

Last, we will discuss the relationship each critique plays on the three main meat categories judged: Ribs, Chicken, and Tri Tip.

Each judge is a part of a judging team comprised of no less than 6 judges. Each team will be seated at a numbered table and each judge will be given an identification number. This helps identify a particular judge, should a scoring discrepancy arise.

A Table Captain, whose primary job is to oversee the fair and impartial judging of all entries presented to the team, will head each table. The Table Captain will instruct the team throughout the judging and will maintain a sense of order at the table, given direction/instruction and guide the judges through the entire judging process.

The Table Captain will bring the entries (usually 6) for each category to his/her table in closed containers. Each container is secretly numbered to ensure anonymity. Starting with the lowest number, the first entry will be opened and placed on the table. At this time, the Table Captain instructs the judges on how and where to write the entry number on their judging slip and on their judging placemat.

Then, the entry will be judged on APPEARANCE only and properly marked on the judging slips. All entries are considered a "9" (the starting score) when placed on the table and graded as deemed appropriate by the judge.

After the entire team has judged the first entry, it will be closed, and then the next entry will be opened and placed on the table. Judges are not to compare the next entry with the previous one. Each entry is judged on its own merits. It is perfectly acceptable for more than one entry to be given the same score, since each is individually judged.

When all entries have been judged for appearance, the judges will be instructed to take samples (in an orderly fashion) from each container and to place them in order on their judging placemat. Once all the judges have their samples, they will begin judging each for TENDERNESS/TEXTURE and TASTE. Scoring these critiques in the same manner as for appearance.

Judging Appearance

Appearance is probably the hardest critique to make. What appeals to one judge may not be as appealing to another.

Entries will be presented in Styrofoam containers (clam shell) and may only be garnished with the leaves

of green leaf lettuce, boston bib, and/or common curly parsley. (No red tipped lettuce, or cilantro is allowed). Absolutely nothing else is allowed in the container. No foil, toothpicks, skewers or stuffing - NOTHING. This includes sauce containers and pooled or puddled sauce. An entry must be presented either with or without sauce. If any foreign object is in a container, it should be brought to the Table Captain's attention and that entry shall be scored a 1 on appearance.

All contestants are instructed to present enough of their entry for 6 to 8 judges. This means each entry should be cut into individual pieces so the judges do not have to cut it apart. The number of pieces submitted and the cutting of the pieces is part of appearance. If either of these is less than what is required, the entry may be judged down on these merits.

Judges may also notice the entries will be in shades of brown. A dark looking entry does not mean it is burnt. Darkness of color is achieved primarily by the use of sugar and paprika in the contestant's rub. Although a part of appearance, whether an entry is light or dark should not weigh heavily in scoring. What's appealing to the judge is what really counts.

The smoke ring is another factor in judging appearance. Many entries will have a noticeable ring at the outer edge of the meat, which can vary in color between light pink and crimson red. This ring simply means that the meat was cooked in a closed container with wood. The depth and color of the smoke ring are not emphasized in the judging. Some meat will be sliced perpendicular to the cuffing board, while others will be sliced at an angle. An angled cut will give a thin smoke ring, the appearance of having penetrated deeper. Both ways of slicing are acceptable. Simply put, if there are 6 to 8 identifiable and cut pieces of meat presented and it is outer color and overall looks/arrangement make it especially appealing, it should be judged high. If the way it is presented does not look appetizing, it should be judged down.

Judging Tenderness / Texture

This critique is fairly easy to make and even easier not to compare. As soon as a judge bites into an entry sample, they should be able to make a snap judgment - well, maybe after the first chew. First impressions are usually the best.

It is far easier to know what isn't perfect than to describe what is. Meat can be mushy (over cooked), tough (under cooked), or can fall apart in your mouth, if not sooner (over cooked).

All that can be said about tenderness is that you will know the best when you bite into it. It should remind you of a hot knife cutting through butter or sinking your teeth into a slice of fresh bread.

Judging Taste

The hardest thing for judges about judging taste is keeping their moans, their groans and facial expressions to themselves. Taste is as individual as you are. It all comes down to what that judges like and how well they like it (i.e., sweet, mild, hot, strong smoke flavor, hint of smoke flavor).

Besides meat's natural flavor, five things can enhance its flavor: marinades, mops, rub, sauce and smoke.

Marinades and mops are similar in that they are spiced liquids added to the meat. Meat can be soaked in or injected with marinade before cooking. Mops are simply basted on during cooking. If not too overpowering, both work well to add flavor and to maintain moisture and tenderness.

Rub is a combination of spices usually containing varied amounts of salt, sugar and/or paprika that are rubbed on or into the meat before cooking. These add flavor and color to the meat and can be used to tenderize as well.

The liquid base of a sauce can vary greatly, but all contain some spices and are usually brushed onto the meat after it has been cooked. If brushed on the meat while it is cooking, the sauce will penetrate the meat more and will be less noticeable to the eye. If brushed on after cooking, it will give the meat a wet glassy appearance. In either case, the meat is judged as it is presented. There shall be no demerit as to whether an entry does or does not contain sauce. It is judged as presented, either with or without.

The four enhancers discussed above are all pretty much influenced by personal likes and dislikes. Smoke, on the other hand, can ruin good barbeque. Too much smoke can give meat either a bitter or harsh flavor depending upon ventilation and the type of wood used. If an entry tastes either bitter or harsh, it should be judged down. Likewise, if one enhancer overpowers all others, the entry should be judged down. There is no set rule to determine the proper balance between smoke and enhancers. Each judge decides that for himself/herself.

Not everyone will like the same thing. This is the hardest critique for a contestant. What the cook likes, maybe the judges won't. In fact, many judges may find that they like a variety of flavors. Most people do.

Judging Ribs

Ribs can have a noticeable smoke ring or they can be a shade of pink/red all the way through the meat. As a rule, a noticeable ring is preferred.

When cooked, the meat will shrink away from the end of the bone a half-inch or so, depending on the thickness of the meat and marbling. If it doesn't, it may mean the meat is undercooked.

If cooked to perfection, the meat should come off the bone freely when bitten into, leaving nothing behind. The bone will also dry quickly of moisture. If undercooked, you will be tugging to get the meat off and the bone will look a little like corn on the cob when you're done. When over-cooked, the meat tends to fall off the whole bone or can be a little dried out.

Judging Chicken

Chicken is usually judged after the skin has been removed. After all, it is the meat that's being judged. Judges are free to judge the sample with or without the skin, however.

As a rule, chicken does not take on a deep smoke ring like other coarse-fiber meats, such as pork or beef. It will generally have a light pink color and should not be mistaken for under cooked or raw meat. When cooked to the proper internal meat temperature, it is quite common to see a little reddish juice in the joint area.

If cooked properly, the meat should be tender and flaky. When overcooked, the meat can either be dry, if not basted properly, or mushy if over basted. When under cooked, the meat tends to be stringy and sticks to the joint areas. If an entry is raw, it will be scored a 1 on tenderness/texture and on taste.

Judging Tri Tip

Tri Tip is usually presented slices and can be either very lean or quite fatty depending upon which part of the Tri Tip is presented. The smoke ring may be present, varying in depth, depending on how the meat is cut and whether it is slow cooked or grilled. Grilled meat does not have a smoke ring.

If it is under cooked it will be chewy and rubbery. If over cooked, it can fall apart when you try to cut it. We at Blazin Hog hope all judges will take their role in any contest as seriously as the contestants take

theirs. Many of these teams have spent a great deal of time and expense to enter these contests and thus deserve and expect the impartial and timely consideration of each BBQ judge.

Likewise, when you eat at your favorite BBQ restaurant, don't take the meat for granted; savor it with the respect good BBQ deserves and enjoy every bite.

Now, go out there and judge for yourself!