

COMING UP: RIBS AND CHILI! By MaryEllen Lamothe

Cooking up ribs has taken on a life of its own and is officially touted as true American cuisine. Debates rage over the type of heat – from aged oak to grocery store briquettes, which impart a nuance of flavor and affects moisture levels and cooking times. It's become a science that only those steeped in good BBQ sauce can speak to with authority.

Kansas City BBQ is the gold standard and those who are designated as a Master Judge Certified by the Kansas City BBQ Society have taken classes and tasted award-winning barbeque many times over. Enter Tracy Allen, a Master Judge who has fine-tuned her palate over 7 years of tasting and evaluating ribs. She started in 2005 as a board member for a Western States BBQ fundraising organization. After several years she wanted to do something more so she took classes to be a judge. But to be on a professional tasting team, you had to be available for two day stints throughout the nation. With her training and knowledge she took on the role of a Master Judge helping to educate cooks and local judging teams about the nuances of judging BBQ using KCBS standards.

We are fortunate to have her as our Chief Judge for the 5th Annual Rio Vista Hog August Bites rib competition on August 18, instructing our local judges on what to look for and how to judge by the KCBS criteria.

Hog August Bites is not a KCBS sanctioned event, but it is an excellent training ground for competitive cooks. Rio Vista's event draws cooks from throughout the East Bay and Sacramento areas in addition to local people who have fine-tuned their rib cooking at past events. The Hog August Bites event abides by the KCBS rules and regulations for BBQ, and Allen will oversee the judging and will bring judges and cooks up to speed, going over KCBS criteria.

What makes a winning BBQ rib? As every palate is different, judging is subjective. But it boils down to three areas of evaluation: Flavor, texture and appearance. Flavor should be balanced with none of the "sweet, salty, spicy, hot and savory" aspects overwhelming. California BBQ tends to be slightly hot and slightly sweet. As to tenderness, the meat should come cleanly off the bone with a bite, but not fall off the bone. Sauce is optional, and must be applied to the rib, not pooled or served separately.

Allen recommends a visit to the KCBS website (www.kcbs.us) to view the detailed criteria for judging BBQ. Cooks and judges can email her with questions prior to the event at ladykir@aol.com.

YOU BE THE JUDGE: Unlike the Ribs, the Chili Competition puts YOU in the judge's seat. For a \$5 tasting kit, anyone can taste all of the chili entries and then vote for the best. Hog August Bites still has room for rib and chili cooks. Entry forms are available online at www.discoverriovista.com/events. Forms are also available at the Visitor Center, 33 N. Second Street.