



## Judges' Handbook

Revised – October 28, 2019

# Introduction

This outline is designed to train and certify judges to be qualified to judge Florida Bar-B-Que Association sanctioned contests.

The definition of what constitutes barbecue is as varied as the ways to spell it. The United States government officially defines barbecue as:

Barbecue meat, such as a product labeled beef barbecue or barbecue pork, shall be cooked by direct action of dry heat resulting from the burning of hard wood or hot coals thereof for a sufficient period of time to assume the usual characteristics of a barbecue article, which includes the formation of a brown crust on the surface and the rendering of surface fat. The product may be basted with a sauce during the cooking process. The weight of the cooked meat shall not exceed 70% of the weight of the fresh, uncooked meat.

Some people use it to describe a social gathering and cooking outdoors. Others use it to describe grilling food. For our purpose here, we use it to describe meat, cooked, using wood smoke to add flavor. Barbecue is not grilling. Grilling is cooking over hot, direct heat. Barbecuing is cooking by using indirect heat or low- level direct heat at lower temperatures and longer cooking times.

There are two major ways to barbecue meat:

1. Low and Slow – Low temperature (225 degrees or so) for a long period of time.
2. Hot and Fast – High temperature (275 degrees or more) for a shorter period of time.

This is probably much more information than you wanted to know.

## I. What is a Sanctioned FBA contest?

A sanctioned FBA contest is a barbecue cook-off that has agreed to use the FBA judging system cook-off rules and regulations. That's the technical definition. Beyond that, an FBA contest is a gathering of some of the finest barbecue cook teams who will try to produce their best barbecue product to be judged by FBA Certified Judges that day. An FBA contest is an opportunity for you, as an FBA certified judge, to enjoy sampling some of the best barbecue you have ever tasted.

### a) Cook Team

A cook team is a person or group of people who have paid an entry fee to cook in an FBA sanctioned barbecue contest. There is always a head cook who knows all their secret recipes and techniques for producing a prize-winning product. The cook team has their own cookers, team members and cooks the meat from scratch on site at the contest, then selects the best of what they have cooked for you to judge.

### b) Judges Briefing

The judges briefing will normally be held at 09:30 am. This will be a review of the FBA judging system. Please pay attention even if you have heard it many times before since any new rules will be announced at this time. You must attend the judges briefing in order to judge that day.

### c) Judging Area

There will be a judge's staging area for you to check-in, greet other judges and swap barbecue tales. This area is for judges only, not friends and relatives, so please do not ask them to join you. The contest organizer may provide food and drinks in the judging area only for the judge and volunteers who work the contest. There may be some contests where there are no food or beverages.

### d) Certification

In order to remain on the FBA roster of active judges, you must **keep your FBA membership current.**

### e) Cook Teams and Judges

If you are a member of a cook team that is cooking in an FBA contest or you are a family member of a cook team that is cooking in an FBA contest you may not enter the judging area at any time during that contest. In other words, you may not judge that contest.

### f) The Master Judge Program

The FBA Master Judge Program is designed to recognize those judges who have shown their support for the most judge friendly, cooker friendly competition barbecue circuit around. They provide the teams with a fair and unbiased arena to test their cooking skills.

The following requirements must be met to become an FBA Master Judge:

- i) Judge a minimum of 20 FBA sanctioned contests.
- ii) Table captain a minimum of 5 times in addition to requirement (i).
- iii) Must be a member of the FBA and must sustain that membership.
- iv) Must cook with or as a cook team at least once at an FBA sanctioned contest. It is suggested that this cook be accomplished on or before your 10th contest.
- v) The Fun Cook is considered an FBA sanctioned contest for the purposes of judging and master judge.

## II. How do you judge?

Just what makes good barbecue and how do you determine it? A harder question is, what makes an entry a 10 and another an 8.5? No one can teach you these things. The only way to learn what is bad, good, or better is by judging often. What we can teach you is the FBA method of scoring and give you something to think about while that first piece of mouth-watering BBQ is sitting on your plate.

### a) Non-comparative judging

The FBA judging system is based upon the principle that you will not compare one sample to another to arrive at a score. Each sample presented by each team will be judged unto itself. You can have more than one of any score - three 9s or five 10s - for example. Generally, your first impression is the best impression. When you put down a score you cannot go back and change that score because the next one is better or worse than the previous sample. You will develop knowledge of what good or bad barbecue is over a period of time and it will be this knowledge and your own taste buds that will influence your scoring. Some of this is easy. Chicken that is cooked to a consistency of rubber, ribs that you cannot tear from the bone with pliers, pork that is mushy or brisket that you cannot chew are easy to score for tenderness. There will be a time in your judging career when you bite into a piece of meat and you will know that you have just eaten the best that can be cooked. The scoring process is very subjective.

### b) Presentation

The first criteria you will judge is the presentation of the entry. The cook team should put the entry in the box in a manner that is appealing to the eye. The entry may be presented as whole pieces, sliced, chunked, pulled and/or chopped. All are acceptable except for ribs - the rib box will contain bone-in ribs only.

- i) Does it look good enough that you instantly want to eat it?
- ii) Did the cook team take time to neatly present the entry or did they just toss it in the box?
- iii) Is the entry neatly sliced, chunked, chopped or pulled?
- iv) Is there any grease floating in the box?
- v) Are there 8 separate and identifiable portions in the box?

c) Definitions of Taste and Tenderness

- i) **Taste:** Taste should be pleasing and represent the meat that it is, because each meat has its own distinctive flavor; brisket should taste like beef etc. The spices, rubs or sauces used should be flavor balanced so that it only complements as opposed to overwhelms the meat presented. If there is any overpowering flavor of spices or sauce, then score accordingly.
- ii) **Tenderness:** Tenderness is determined by how the meat feels in your mouth, which is called "mouth feel". Is the meat hard to chew or is it soft and mushy or does it have what you consider a pleasant feel? Focus on the sample at hand and whether it has a pleasant eating experience. Keep in mind, you are judging what is presented as opposed to what you think should be presented.

d) Meat Types

- i) **Chicken:** Chicken can be cooked with skin on or skin off. Sample the entry as presented. If it is skin on, leave the skin in place. Removing it will significantly alter the flavor and tenderness that the Pit Master intended. Take a bite, there is no need to dissect it. The skin should bite through easily and the rest of the skin should still be in place. The chicken meat should release easily from the sample and should have a tender and pleasant mouth feel as well. If it is chewy, rubbery, or mushy/too soft, it is either undercooked or overcooked. Tenderness should be based on mouth feel and the chewing experience.
- ii) **Ribs:** Your bite should be from the middle of the rib and deep enough that your teeth gently come in contact with the bone. *Avoid biting the bone but **bite to the bone**.* The meat should release cleanly and easily from the bone, and there should be a relatively clean outline of where your bite was removed from the rest of the meat. The rest of the rib meat should still be attached to the bone. The mouth feel and chew should be a pleasant experience.
- iii) **Pork:** Pork should be tender but mushy is unacceptable. If Medallions (round slices cut from the "money muscle") are presented, take a bite to check for tenderness. There should be no tugging required. Medallions, chunks, pulled or sliced should have some body and maintain its integrity but at the same time be easy to chew. Your taste senses will let you know if it was tender as opposed to mushy and unpleasant. If 'bark' is presented, and it is optional, there is a different guideline for tenderness. Bark is the dark crust on the exterior of the pork butt. It is acceptable for bark to be considerably chewier than the interior meat. Good bark can be a chewy flavor bomb in your mouth. Understand what it is and how different it is from the interior meat. No entry should be judged down because the bark is chewy and has a concentration of flavor. On the other hand, if you are unable to chew it and the flavor is bitter or too extreme, judge it accordingly.
- iv) **Brisket:** Brisket is typically presented as slices, burnt ends, pulled and chunked. The accepted standard thickness for slices is roughly that of a pencil thickness. You should be able to gently pick up the slice from the box and it should stay together as one piece. It should be limp and hang mostly straight down when held by one end. A simple pull test can be an indicator for slice tenderness. Hold an end of the

slice in each hand and gently pull until the slice parts. If it separates before you pull it is likely, too tender (over cooked). If it takes a more tugging it is likely a little too tough or (under cooked). Take a bite, and let your mouth decide. Your first mouth feel impression will guide you. Does it maintain its body and have a tender chew? Does it maintain its body and take a little longer or more effort to chew? If you have to pull the bite away from the slice with some effort, it is undercooked. The level of effort will determine the level of doneness.

Burnt ends are optional. If burnt ends are presented, they should be a tender, smoky and meaty bite size piece of the brisket. There is no size standard for burnt ends. Burnt ends come from the fattier part of the brisket and will be very juicy. The juiciness comes from intramuscular fat that is rendered down. They will be tender and offer little to no resistance when chewing. "Melt in your mouth" is desirable as opposed to mushy or tough. However, if you feel unpleasant chunks or globs of un-melted fat in your mouth after chewing, those can be undesirable and should be judged accordingly.

**Remember you are judging what is presented, not what you think should be presented!**

### III. Judging Procedure

The judging tables are set up in a tent or a building that is away from the cooking area. There are always 6 judges at a table. You will be assigned to a table. You will always sit at the same place throughout judging. If by chance you are assigned a table with a spouse, significant other or close friend bring it to the attention of the FBA representative.

The cook teams will bring the entry to the check-in table and it will have their name on the top of the box. The name is then changed to a secret number that is only known to the FBA representatives. The FBA system of judging is a double-blind system. The cook teams do not know what judge is judging them and the judges do not know what cook team they are judging.

Your scorecard will have a label on it with your name, table number and judging number and the category being judged. **Please ensure that your card reflects the category you are actually judging (Chicken, Ribs, etc.).** The Table Captain brings the boxes to the table, which in most cases will be 5 or 6 entries. The Table Captain will call off the entry numbers for you to enter them on your scorecard. Enter them in the order that they are called out. The first box is then opened and checked by the Table Captain for violations, then shown to the table for presentation. After looking at the entry, all judges will score the entry for presentation.

The box is then passed around for you to take a sample. Please only take one sample and then judge it for taste and tenderness. Once everyone at the table has scored the first entry the other entries will be handled in the same manner. After all entries have been scored the Table Captain will collect the scorecards and turn them over to the FBA representative.

How much should you eat? If you are really, really hungry you may eat as much of the sample that you want. But can you eat 6 chicken thighs, 6 ribs, 6 samples of pork and 6 samples of brisket and live to tell about it? Sure, you can. But limit yourself as to how much you consume while judging. If you eat one ounce of everything you could eat as much as 2 pounds of meat. You can always eat more when you are finished judging.

The Table Captain is usually an experienced judge. They are usually not judging, only controlling the actual procedure. The FBA requires a minimum of 8 separate and identifiable portions of meat in each box. In the case of pulled or chopped meat, only, enough to feed 8 people. The judges get the first 6 portions, one for the Table Captain and the rest goes to the grazing table.

#### IV. Problems and Pitfalls to Avoid

- a) A roaring hangover will make it impossible for you to judge properly. Your taste buds will be fried. Wait until the judging is over to consume any alcohol. We want you to have a clear head and an untainted palate while you are judging. Consuming alcohol in between categories or during the judging process is strictly prohibited and you will be removed that day if observed.
- b) Do not discuss the samples with the other judges at your table while there are scorecards on the table. Once the scorecards are picked up you are encouraged to quietly discuss the entries you have just eaten, keeping in mind that tables around you may not have finished judging.
- c) **Do not visit the cook teams after the judges meeting or between judging.** You will be disqualified as a judge. The teams are getting ready for their next entry and do not have time to socialize with you.
- d) If you get sick during judging, let the Table Captain know so a replacement judge can be found.
- e) Do not discuss your scores with any cook team.
- f) Taking pictures during the judging process, that is, from the time the TC brings their tray to the serving table to the time the scoring cards are turned in to the TC, is **NOT ALLOWED**. Do not take any picture of the table showing the table number.
- g) You are **NOT ALLOWED** to copy your scores on a separate piece of paper or enter them in a smart phone or remove them from the judging area in any manner.

We all learn from each other. But, remember, it is YOUR score and YOUR average that we want you to use in judging FBA sanctioned events. We become better judges by broadening our experiences, not just listening to other judges.

Let's go back and talk about the individual entries for a bit.

- a) Chicken: Pink around the chicken bones. Most of the time this will occur in the legs and thighs. You take a bite of it and then you see the redness. Is it done? If the juices run clear it will be done. The characteristic of smoked chicken is to have this redness around the bone.
- b) Ribs: Some cook teams will lay the ribs flat and some will turn them on the side. Some will do it both ways in the box so you can see how they were cooked and they want you to see the pinkness which is the smoke ring. Remember, we do not consider the smoke ring when judging as it can be artificially induced. Tenderness - we like to think the meat should have a slight tug to it when you take a clean bite from the bone. The bone may turn white or dry out. If it falls off the bone or if other meat pulls off with bite it may be some level of overcooked.
- c) Pork: When you are judging pork a lot of the teams will put some bark in the container. The bark is the outside of the pork butt that is slightly charred and often considered the best part of the pork because it has a lot of flavors. When you mix that with the rest of the pork, you've got a good entry. Teams will often place various parts of the pork butt in the box such as the money muscle, pulled pork and bark.
- d) Brisket: Presentation. It is going to come to you sliced 98% of the time. However, it may be chopped, chunks and, yes, it can be presented pulled. Which is the right way? All are correct. The way the cook team presented it to you is the way they want you to judge it. There may be some burnt ends. The best burnt ends come from the point of the brisket. Some teams only cook the point because they feel they cannot get a good burnt end on the flat.

Flavor as previously stated before is subjective. It's your personal taste that counts. What is brisket supposed to taste like? It has a flavor all unto itself. Some cooks marinate it, inject it, poke it, cuss over it and many other ways too numerous to mention. You have to decide is this something I want to eat the rest of it or leave it on my plate to throw it out. Remember, brisket should taste like beef.

Many people have tried to come up with the perfect answer for "how can I tell if it's tender? So far, there doesn't seem to be a perfect answer. If you can pick it up with both hands give it a slight tug and it comes apart easily without it crumbling it probably is a good piece of brisket. If you have to tug on it and it snaps back at you, it's probably pretty tough. If you cannot tear it apart it may be undercooked. The real test is when you put it in your mouth and chew. You know it is closer to the best when some of the meat juices are still there for you to enjoy.

To sauce or not to sauce. Many Cook teams do not put any sauce on their entry. For those that do, determine if all you can taste is sauce. Does it overpower the taste of the meat? This is a meat contest not a sauce contest. You will find as many types of sauce as you will find BBQ restaurants – NC pepper water, tomato-based sauces, mustard based sauces and vinegar sauces. Sauce should work with and enhance the flavor of the meat. Judge the entry as it is presented to you with or without sauce.

What if the sample is cold? Temperature should not affect taste or tenderness, score SUBJECTIVELY.

## V. The FBA Scoring System

The highest score you can give is a 10 and the lowest is a 5. You may score in half point increments such as 8, 8.5 etc. If an entry is undercooked or overcooked, you would score down. If you think the entry is good you will give it a higher score. You may not change your score once you have recorded it and moved on to the next judging criteria. The only time a score can be changed is by the FBA representative disqualifying that entry. If for some reason you get the score in the wrong box, notify the Table Captain and you will be instructed to cross out, do not erase the improperly placed score and insert it in the proper box. You may not change that score.

10	EXCELLENT
9.5	VERY GOOD
9	GOOD
8.5	ABOVE AVERAGE
8	SLIGHTLY ABOVE AVERAGE
7.5	AVERAGE
7	SLIGHTLY BELOW AVERAGE
6.5	BELOW AVERAGE
6	POOR
5.5	VERY POOR
5	INEDIBLE

Disqualification of an entry will be scored a 2 (two). The FBA representative is the only person who can tell you to give this score. If you have already scored the entry and it is deemed illegal, at the direction of the FBA representative you will cross out what you have scored and enter a 2 (two). You will then turn over your scorecard and put the entry number on the back along with a comment.

If you have a bad piece of meat and don't want to swallow it, discreetly remove it from your mouth and dispose of it quietly.

Comments for the cook teams are encouraged and **are required for any score of 7 or less**. You will remain anonymous when you make them. Comments may be made for both good and bad BBQ. To make a comment, simply check the comment box on the right side of the scorecard aligned with the chosen entry. Turn the card over and put the box number and your comment on the back. Please make your comments polite and useful. "The worst BBQ I ever ate." doesn't help the cook team improve. "This entry was way overcooked and too salty." does help

them. Remember the cook teams put a lot of time, effort, and money into that one bite of meat that you judge. You owe it to them to do your best.

## VI. FBA Judges Notes

- a) Please, **Don't Compare!** Judge each entry on its own merit. Score each entry individually. There may be more than one entry with an 8.5 (or another number). That's OK! Remember to use 1/2-point increments when applicable. And do not put a .0 after a whole number. Remember that a two (2) is reserved for disqualification, which can only be authorized by the FBA representative. Score carefully! Once you have recorded a score for an entry, it CANNOT be changed unless directed by the FBA representative due to a rules infraction. If you score a 7.0 or lower, please turn your scorecard over and note as to why you scored the way you did. Take your time! We want you to use the FBA scoring system to indicate the differences in the entries, so judge carefully! If the entry is late or not turned in, the computer will automatically show zeros for that entry.
- b) Judging credit shall be given for category judging, table captain duties, table captain mentoring, and turn-in assistance if needed by the FBA representative.
  - i) Category judging shall include any certified judge that is selected for a designated contest. That judge shall complete all four categories of meat to receive credit unless an approved removal is made by the FBA representative. If a removal is necessary the FBA representative will designate a replacement to complete the meat categories. Judging credit shall be given to the original judge if at least two categories are completed. The replacement judge will receive full credit.
  - ii) Table captain duties are assigned by the FBA Representative using certified judges that have completed 10 contests. If necessary, the FBA Representative may select a judge with less than 10 contests to fill a position if a judge with more than 10 contests is not available.
  - iii) Table captain mentors are senior judges that are masters and qualified to guide new table captains. A list of qualified and willing master judges will be assembled by the judging committee working with the lead FBA representative and approved by the FBA BOD. This list will be developed and modified as necessary to maintain a viable group of mentors to assist new table captains.
  - iv) Certified judges may receive judging credit working as turn-in assistants if approved and deemed necessary by the FBA representative. This category is provided to increase the quality of the turn-in process and provide a more qualified group to assist the FBA Representatives not to exceed three credits for master judge qualification. Master judges may be selected when needed without a maximum number.
- c) Judging credit shall be given to certified judges that perform double duty working as both a judge and table captain. That double credit will be posted on the judges list as two credits.

## **VII. How do I get started?**

All the contests, after they have been approved by the BOD, are listed on the FBA web site, which is [www.fbabbq.com](http://www.fbabbq.com) and under the EVENTS heading. Scroll down to the contest that you are interested in and select where it says, 'Find Out More'.

On the right side of the listing, click on 'Judge Info' and follow instructions. Judge sign up is normally open for a 30-day period starting 120 days prior to the contest. It does not matter what order you sign up in as long as it is within the window. After the sign up has closed, all names on the list are randomized by computer. This list is sent to the Lead Representative for the contest. The Lead Representative confirms the first 28 judges (usually from the first 28 names on the list but exceptions can be made for special situations such as needing one event for Master Judge or 50 contest pin). Confirmed judges will be notified and given a few days to confirm availability with the Lead Representative. Failure to confirm will result in your name being removed from the list and replaced by the next person on the list. The list of confirmed judges will be posted on the FBA website under the event heading. The list of non-confirmed judges will also be posted in the order they appeared on the randomized list. If judges need to be replaced or judges need to be added, they will normally be taken in order from the non-confirmed list.

Twenty-eight judges are the minimum number needed for any contest. (Four tables of six judges plus a table captain.) As more teams sign up, more tables of judges are added. These will normally be taken in order from the list of non-confirmed judges and you will be notified of your selection by email.

Almost all FBA sanctioned contests now use electronic sign up rather than application to the individual event organizer.

Another way to get to judge, if not confirmed, is to show up at the contest and take the place of a judge who may be a "No Show". If you don't get in to judge you can volunteer with the Reps - they will find a job for you.

Lastly, if you are confirmed to judge and are not able to make the contest, please call or email both the lead Rep and contest organizer. Their numbers are on the listing of the contest. If the contest has an electronic sign up there will instructions whom to contact in that event. Not confirming a "No Show" will get your name on a list given to future event organizers.

## VIII. APPENDIX

### a) Table Captain Instructions

Table Captains are responsible for their tables - that they are set up properly, initially and between the categories, with pencils, plates, paper towels, crackers, water for each judge and anything else that is supplied by the organizer. TC's are the liaison between the judges and the Reps. If you feel unable to carry a tray to the table, ask a Rep for help. If a judge has a question, it is directed to you, and if necessary, you should call for a Rep. Before each category the TC passes out the judge's scorecards. Ask the judges to keep the tops on their water bottles and keep the bottles flat on the table. Remind the judges that the scoring consists of whole numbers and half numbers and to not put a zero after a whole number. Ask the judges to refrain from taking any pictures during the judging process. Judges are NOT allowed to copy their scores on a separate piece of paper, enter them in a smart phone or remove their scores from the judging area in any form. If at any time during the scoring one of your judges sees anything that could be a rules violation call for a Rep.

Here is a more detailed list of the Table Captain' duties:

- i) When TC's are called, go to the turn in area and find the tray for your table
- ii) Verify that the numbers on the boxes and the routing sheet match and no number has previously been used on the routing sheet.
- iii) Take the tray to your serving table.
- iv) Read all the box numbers to your judges and have verification from one of the judges.
- v) Check the first box and verify at least 8 portions and no rules violations
- vi) Announce "Judging for presentation only" and have the first judge verify box number.
- vii) Show the box to each judge until they nod or say OK.
- viii) Ask if all judges have finished scoring
- ix) After all judges have scored, announce "Judging for taste and tenderness".
- x) Serve each judge and yourself last. Never pass the box around a second time.
- xi) Place box back on the tray and pull the label halfway up and bend back.
- xii) After each judge has scored, repeat steps 5 - 11 with the rest of boxes, starting with the next judge
- xiii) After all boxes are scored, collect the completed score cards and verify all are properly completed, if any 7's, comments on back of card and check if all scores are within 1 - 1 1/2 points of each other. Make sure that there is no zero after a whole number.
- xiv) Ask the judges to leave their plates in place until a Rep approves the scorecards. When approved the judges can then dispose of their leftovers or place them in their storage bags if they have an iced cooler to preserve the meat safely.

- xv) Turn in the scoring cards to a Rep and receive approval of the scorecards.
- xvi) Take your tray with boxes to the grazing table.
- xvii) Start a discussion of best samples, scores and reasons for any low scores.
- xviii) Set up your table for the next category.
- xix) Repeat the entire process for the next three categories.

If a judge is scoring too high or too low, you may take the judge aside and ask them why they gave those scores.

After all scoring is completed assist cleaning up your table.

## **IX. Notes**

Florida Bar-B-Que Association

Master Judge Program

Cook Team Participation



Contest Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Judging date: \_\_\_\_\_

Cook Team: \_\_\_\_\_

Head Cook: \_\_\_\_\_

Judge that cooked with you: \_\_\_\_\_

By signing this document, I, as head cook, do certify that the judge named above participated in preparation, cooking, presentation, and cleanup at the FBA Sanctioned barbecue contest listed herein.

Head Cook please sign here: \_\_\_\_\_

Judge please sign here: \_\_\_\_\_

Give this form to the FBA representative prior to the awards ceremony.

FBA rep, please send this form to the Secretary.

## Florida Barbecue Association

### ***Judge's Agreement and Certification***

The undersigned agrees that all information learned in this judging seminar is to be held in confidence and that all materials are the property of the Florida Bar-B-Que Association, and further that they will judge in Florida Bar-B-Que Association Sanctioned contests according to the rules and regulations of the Florida Bar-B-Que Association, and that they will judge fairly and impartially all of the entries presented to them, and that they will judge in a non-comparative manner so that each and every entry presented for judging will be judged on its own merits.

You further agree to hold harmless from any cause of action the Florida Bar-B-Que Association, its authorized representatives, any contest organizer and their employees and volunteers, and all cook team members. You acknowledge that your participation in any Florida Bar-B-Que Association event is voluntary and you are not being compensated in any way.

Your name (printed) \_\_\_\_\_

Your signature \_\_\_\_\_

Today's date \_\_\_\_\_

FBA Instructor \_\_\_\_\_