To the left and right of James Bowman’s many-miled motorhome are shiny new rigs, each of which must have cost close to $100,000. All around him, confident, championship cooks scurry about their custom-built barbecue smokers, some of which are even built into the rear cargo sections of their sparkling RVs and trailers.

Bowman, ’74, doesn’t have his new cooker. It’s still at home, not quite finished, so he’s using his son-in-law’s big smoker.

“Mine is still in the process,” says Bowman, a welder and millwright recently retired from the General Motors plant in Kansas City and a former defensive back for coach Don Fambrough’s football teams from 1971 to ’73. “I was crawling around on the ground for 10 days, trying to get it done in time, but I had to put that aside and start loading up my motorhome and figuring what all I was going to bring out here.”

“Out here” is the big-time of competitive barbecue cooking, the second-annual Oklahoma Joe’s BBQ Cookoff and World Brisket Open, May 18-19 in the parking lot of the Kansas Speedway. It is Americana nirvana, a barbecue contest at a NASCAR track, and it’s here that Bowman, his son-in-law, brother-in-law, wife, grandchildren and friends have decided to move from backyard barbecuing to the contest circuit, where trained and certified judges ruthlessly rate your meats in blind taste tests, the outcomes of which can be worth thousands of dollars and, more important, bragging rights that can launch an empire.

“I’ve seen some heavyweights out here,” Bowman says.

**Cook it, study it, sauce it, smoke it, grill it, have a contest over it and make new friends with it; just don’t forget to eat the savory sensation of the new American summer, barbecue.**

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**It’s ALL GOOD**

**BY CHRIS LAZZARINO**

**PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMIE ROPER**
Indeed, parked next door is the Smokin’ Guns rig of Phil and Linda Hopkins, who parlayed their 1999 Jack Daniel’s World Championship into a successful restaurant and catering business in Northtown Kansas City. What Bowman perhaps doesn’t know is that Hopkins, like himself, is a welder by trade who fashioned his own cooking rigs, and one day not so long ago took the leap just as Bowman is doing now.

For Hopkins, the transformation began in 1995, when he attended his first American Royal Barbecue, an annual October rite since 1980 that has become one of the world’s biggest and most prestigious barbecue events. The following year he attended a few more, and soon enough he “pretty much got hooked.”

“My wife says we got into it 12 years ago because we’re competitive, but we stay in it for the camaraderie,” Hopkins says. “Barbecuers are so friendly.”

Elizabeth Nice Lumpkin, j’90, championship cook and owner of Boss Hawg’s, of Topeka, says, “Everybody is there to win, but you still help everybody who needs anything from you.” She relates a story about a blue-ribbon cook whose neighbor at a big contest accidentally burned his brisket during the night; this fellow handed over one of his own, cooked and ready to turn in, knowing it could beat him in the judging. “Winning,” Lumpkin says, “was less important to him than comradeship.”

Lumpkin advises that Bowman and other contest neophytes should not cringe at the sight of their competitors’ custom-built smoking rigs, some of which cost $10,000 or more. “We won the world brisket championship on a Weber cooker that cost $180,” she says. “It’s not the size of the smoker; it’s the taste of the meat that wins contests.”

Also at the Speedway event is cook-off....
veteran Craig Kidwell, of Odessa, Mo., who is surrounded by many thousands of dollars worth of equipment while relating the details of his first American Royal, in 1985: “We had a Weber in the back of an El Camino,” Kidwell says, chuckling at the memory. “It doesn’t make any difference what you cook on. Learn your techniques, your spices and your cooking times. Once you have all that down, then any dog can win.”


“Perfectly good food can’t be no sin,” poet Honoree Fanonne Jeffers writes in the title work of The Gospel of Barbecue. “Laugh a little harder. Go on and gnaw that bone clean.” Zora Neale Hurston, in Dust Tracks on a Road, wrote, “Maybe all of you who do not have the good fortune to meet or meet again, in this world, will meet at a barbecue.”

Phil Hopkins, of Smokin’ Guns BBQ, invokes the spirit of communal events by saying, “It’s all fun, man. Come and hang out.” Kansas City barbecue legend Ollie Gates, quoted in Peace, Love, and Barbecue, says, “It’s all good, as long as it’s done with some feeling. Barbecue allows people to express themselves.” Lawrence writer, chef and restaurant consultant Tom King says barbecue is about the ritual, a secular communion.

“There’s one thing about barbecue,” says aficionado Tim Stultz, c’92, a Lawrence builder and barbecue competitor. “Even if it doesn’t win a blue ribbon, it’s still pretty good.”

Pretty good, and pretty huge. Everywhere we turn, barbecue and grilling seem to signal the onset of summer. The Borders bookstore in downtown Lawrence ushered in the Memorial Day weekend with a display of 13 barbecue books—one of which, by TV chef Rachael Ray, focused only on barbecue side dishes—and just as many different jars of barbecue sauces, plus an assortment of barbecue forks and spatulas.

When the Kansas City Royals recently unveiled plans for a $250 million renovation of Kauffman Stadium, they trumped a “giant barbecue pit behind right field.” Said a team official, “Thousands of people will be hanging out there wanting to partake in what Kansas City does best.” (He presumably meant barbecuing, not winning a whole lot of baseball games.)

The Kansas City Barbeque Society, formed in 1986, has more than 5,000 members and sanctions about 300 barbecue contests worldwide. In 1999, authors Rick Browne and Jack Bettridge estimated that 6 million people attend 500 barbecue contests each year.

Kansas City psychiatrist Richard Davis, c’53, m’54, won a blue ribbon for his sauce at the first American Royal Barbecue, in 1980, launching the iconic brand K.C. Masterpiece. Bryan Tyrell, c’84, catering manager for Bodean’s BBQ Smoke House restaurants in London, says longingly, “Per capita, I would say there’s more barbecue in Kansas City than anywhere else in the world. I could name 10 restaurants there I would eat at tomorrow if I could.”

Cowtown Barbecue sauces, a team effort that includes Podrebarac and Jeff Stehney, j’84, owner of the wildly popular Kansas City joint Oklahoma Joe’s, won American Royal blue ribbons in 2001 and 2002, leading to Podrebarac’s playful marketing and label-art riffs on “best sauce on the planet!”

“Like the heart of darkness,” Podrebarac says of barbecue mania, “there’s no way out.”

James Bowman, son-in-law Ed Williams and brother-in-law George White Sr. are firing up Williams’ big cooker on the Friday of the Oklahoma Joe’s cookoff at Kansas Speedway. Their firepit bantering sizzles right along with hickory sticks rapidly reduced to coals.
“Everybody wants to be the best,” Ed Williams says. “I know I do.” He explains that his cooking philosophy won’t waver from what he does every weekend at home in KCK: “I just do what I do. It’s all about the taste.” Says George White, “We all sit around the grill and smell the smoke. That’s when we know it’s done.”

“Smell the smoke, baby, smell the smoke,” Williams says. “It’s all good.” Lois Bowman, James’ wife, explains that their family cookouts operate on “an open-door policy. And sometimes they get pretty full.”

“I don’t care whose house I go to,” James Bowman says, “I’m going to eat.”

Talk of backyard family barbecues turns the men toward the real purpose of their first foray in competition cooking: their children and grandchildren. They grew up the sons of Kansas City fathers who passed on their love of barbecue, and they intend to do the same.

“It’s definitely all the way down in the bones,” White says. “It’s what we know.”

“This is a tradition that’s passed on,” Bowman adds. “That’s important to us.”

“Our kids watch us do this barbecuing that we enjoy, and it makes a difference,” White continues. “Instead of being out there in the streets, doing what kids do, our kids are with us, with the family, and they actually watch us.”

“Then they are doing what Daddy and Uncle are doing,” Williams says. “They are cooking.”

“They have a positive thing to watch and learn,” White says. He adds, “If you could bring down the price of charcoal and the price of these grills, then our kids would really do it.”

“Serious money,” Williams agrees. “But it’s fun.”

“It’s as much fun as there is,” James Bowman says, smiling, staring at the smoker and plotting strategy. The long weekend is finally under way.

“Perfectly good food can’t be no sin. Laugh a little harder. Go on and gnaw that bone clean.”

—Honorée Fanonne Jeffers
Boxes of surveys fill Barbara Shortridge’s Lindley Hall office. Shortridge, g’68, PhD’77, a geography lecturer, teaches a course each fall called Geography of American Foodways, which includes lectures on barbecue history and tradition.

She currently researches the dining habits evident in all 3,000 or so U.S. counties. To do so, Shortridge mailed out surveys—local librarians proved especially willing to cooperate—asking longtime local residents to list a sample menu they would prepare for out-of-town guests. She enters the results into spreadsheets and searches for patterns in distribution, for instance, of fruit-pie preferences.

As for barbecue, regionalism rules. A sauce favored in one North Carolina county might be spurned a few miles away, to say nothing of variable preferences for the basic barbecue elements of pork, beef, sausage, chicken and turkey.

Shortridge roughly outlines the area of barbecue’s true heritage within a geographic rectangle bordered by Austin, Texas; Memphis, Tenn; North Carolina; and north Florida. Kansas City, known for inclusive tastes for meats and sauces, is, historically speaking, an outsider.

“At the Civil War, the Exodusters who came to Kansas City brought their...
barbecuing tradition with them," Shortridge says. "When they got to Kansas City, they found a place where they had access to really cheap meats, with the stockyards there, and really nice wood, with hickory forests close by.

"That combination of factors put Kansas City ... well, it didn’t get on the map until much later, but it started a tradition."

Fred Woodward, director of University Press of Kansas, was at the University of South Carolina Press in the late 1970s when he noticed the director had signed a contract for a book about another Southern favorite.

"A history of grits," Woodward says, barely cloaking his disdain for the notion. "I imagine I had a moment when I thought that barbecue was more interesting than grits."

So Woodward, a native of Clarksville, Tenn., who grew up eating pulled-pork sandwiches with slaw and twice-baked potatoes, boned up on barbecue. He researched the word’s etymology, the history of barbecue as it was created in tropical areas of the New World, and its place in the society of the slave-holding rural South and, later, its commodification in the modernized South, especially for early business opportunities for entrepreneurial African-Americans.

While he ponders “wispy dreams of writing a book one day,” Woodward pursues the immediate matter of barbecue with a dozen or so campus colleagues who occasionally road-trip around the area, or even as far as the Texas Hill Country, for carnivorous feasts.

Because it was traditionally cooked outdoors, and in large quantities, barbecue came of age as a sociable meal for family, friends and even entire communities (a notion never lost on ambitious politicians). A slow-cooked food should not be spurned by a fast-paced society; eat it around the firepit, picnic table or banquet hall, but please do so together.

Barbecue’s best quality, it might be said, is that it’s not easily eaten in a car. “This idea of families no longer sitting down to table to eat together, I think that’s a real loss,” Woodward says. “It’s a sociable time, when people should visit and be in good humor.”

He is pleased about the popularity of barbecue contests: “This is a way to keep the craft going.” Yet Woodward also notes that barbecue passions—"Our culture’s habit of professionalizing pastimes," is his phrase—occasionally burn a bit hot.

“I do think it’s part of the American character, that people take their avocations too seriously,” he says. “But, you know ... you can do worse things.”

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Topeka restaurateur Elizabeth Lumpkin grew up in Kansas City, Kan., where her father took her to Rosedale Barbecue every Saturday. “In Kansas City, it’s a birthing day. It’s part of our heritage,” she says. “It’s part of who we are.”

While living in Lawrence and working as a technical writer in the early 1990s, the newlywed Lumpkin began tinkering with her own recipes and techniques. In 1995 she saw an advertisement for the annual barbecue contest in McLouth.

“I had no idea what a barbecue contest was all about,” Lumpkin recalls, “but I said, ‘I make some pretty darned good ribs so I’m going to do that.’ And my husband went along very grudgingly.”

Barbecue bookshelf

THE BARBECUE BOOK BUFFET IS ENORMOUS AND GROWING. HERE ARE A FEW TASTY RECOMMENDATIONS FROM OUR RESEARCH:

- **BBQ USA**, by Steven Raichlen (Workman Press, 2003), is a complete, authoritative reference, including history, techniques and recipes. Well illustrated.
- Lawrence free-lance writer and food authority Tom King says Raichlen’s *Barbecue! Bible* (Workman, 2000) is the only barbecue book in his library.
- **Peace, Love, and Barbecue**, by Mike Mills and Amy Mills Tunnicliffe (Rodale, 2005), is a superb survey of the characters and events populating the American barbecue scene, including interviews, recipes, techniques and glossaries.
- **The Gospel of Barbecue**, by Honorée Fanonne Jeffers (Kent State University Press, 2000), is a beautiful book of poetry about the African-American experience, including barbecue. —C.L.
Cutting to the sizzle, Hank, '94, and Elizabeth Lumpkin became one of the country's most successful competition barbecue teams. They opened a storefront catering kitchen and watched in amazement as it virtually expanded itself into a huge restaurant and bar on 29th Street in southwest Topeka.

Hank, by all accounts one of the most popular members of the championship barbecue circuit, died suddenly in 2003; Elizabeth spent two years trying to decide whether to carry on, until finally she decided that remaining in barbecue would have to be part of her healing.

“If it's something like a religion, like some people say it is, then I suppose you're a Baptist or a barbecueur, right? So I'm a barbecueur. It's still not as fun as when Hank was here, and it probably never will be. But a bad day at the barbecue is a lot more fun than a good day at the office. So here I am.”

Back in the Boss Hawg's kitchen, 34-year-old kitchen manager Jerome Elrod oversees a rotisserie of savory ribs destined to delight dinner-hour patrons. He works quickly and happily.

“I love it. I love cooking this food. I love going around town in my work shirt and people say, 'Oh, you're at Boss Hawg's? It's so awesome! Keep it up!'' It feels good to be part of this company. It feels good to be part of barbecue, period.”

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A las, James Bowman won no ribbons in his contest debut. His team beat about a third of the crowded field in the brisket contest, and was 49th of 87 in the chicken category, so while there is room for improvement, so, too, is there room for hope.

And a whole lot more fun.

“It was a great experience,” Ed Williams says. “We knew we had a lot to learn, and we did. Plus we had our family supporting us, so it’s all good.”

He pauses, then asks, “So, when’s the next one?”

Trendy barbecue not always so hot

DESPITE POP-CULTURE PRESUMPTIONS TO THE CONTRARY, BARBECUE’S APPEAL IS NOT AND NEVER HAS BEEN, UNIVERSAL.

Dick Laverentz bought Southern Pit BBQ, a popular student hangout near 19th and Massachusetts streets, from Ralph Bright in 1959. He offered rotisserie ribs, beef and ham, but made more money selling beer than barbecue.

“I used to get requests to barbecue a raccoon,” recalls Laverentz, now retired in Oskaloosa and a merchant at the Lawrence Antique Mall. “Anything that walked or moved, they thought I could barbecue.”

He adds, “There was more demand for steak then, as opposed to barbecue, which I would consider a specialty item at that time. It was still something that was not the standard fare, so to speak.”

Ribs, brisket, ham and pork won’t be the fare—standard or otherwise—at the Casbah Market, a grocery opening this summer in the downtown space formerly occupied by the Casbah clothing and accessories shop.

Partners Josh Millstein, e’01; his girlfriend, Cassy Ainsworth, c’07; and sister, Casey Millstein, a senior sculpture student, are vegetarians, yet just because they won’t eat or sell meat doesn’t mean they don’t want an invitation to the block-party barbecue.

“Veggie burgers, tempeh, portabella mushrooms, those are all huge for vegetarians to grill,” Ainsworth says. “We have fun with that just like everyone else does. It’s a great American tradition.”

Millstein says he doesn’t want to scare off omnivores; when they need veggies to fill out their barbecue meals, he hopes they stop into the Casbah.

“We’re going to concentrate on making it a place meat eaters will still appreciate,” Millstein says. “We want to cater to them.”

—C.L.