

HOLD ON!

“We’re Going for a Ride!” Meet Damon and Lu Holter



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There are many reasons you enter the world of BBQ. For Lu and Damon Holter it is for the fun and a passion they can share together. It is also about being outdoors, the camaraderie of the BBQ family and the friendships you develop. What started ten years ago over dinner when Damon decided he was going to produce his own steak sauce, has matured into Croix Valley Foods and a formidable competitive cooking duo.

Let’s meet Lu “the Duchess of Pork” Holter. Lu evolved into the competitive world of cooking after Damon caught the bug. A paralegal at the time and their first competition was a Lion’s Club backyard competition where, charcoal adverse (at the time), Damon used a propane grill and they served their ribs out of a crock pot. That effort was good enough to earn them a third place finish.

Lu has never looked back. She has competed in over 40 KCBS contests, KCBS ancillary categories, World Food events, Culinary Fight Club

Photos courtesy of
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events, SCA contests and Guy’s Grocery Games on the Food Network. You can feel her energy as she talks about the last ten years – balancing family, a growing business and competing. This year, at the World Food Championships, she competed in the Cowboy Charcoal Fire Ice Grilling Challenge and the EAT BBQ contest. She has also competed in the Culinary Fight Club events in Minneapolis (placing 1st in the Blended Burger competition) and in Denver (placing 3rd). She is proud of a 4th place finish in the pasta category at World Food a few years ago. For Lu it truly isn’t about winning (they do get a lot of calls), it’s about competing. Lu enjoys all types of food related competitions, but prefers competitions where she can showcase her creative talents.

Frequently you will find Lu in the cooking videos and Facebook live videos they do at the events they cook at. Her vibrant, positive personality makes her a natural in front of the camera – relaying cooking tips and showcasing the products they use and trust from their industry partners. In the early years of Croix Valley Food, Lu continued to work as a paralegal. However, one of the things Damon is most proud of is that the business they built together now allows Lu to devote her full attention to it and competing in all the contests she chooses. Her career as a paralegal is now in the rearview mirror.

Which brings us to Damon “The Grill Meister” Holter. Damon is one that doesn’t sit still and his mind is in constant motion. He said he likes having 30 “irons in the fire”, because you never know which one will “glow” I can believe it. He comes from a background in the food service/restaurant industry and that gave him a solid foundation to build Croix Valley Foods on.

Speaking of building, he actually built his first house. He also painted the 2003 State of Wisconsin’s Great Lakes Salmon and Trout Stamp. He entered his artwork in 2002 and didn’t win. Typical of Damon’s perseverance, he sought out some of the judges and asked why he didn’t win. They offered him some insights into the selection process which he then incorporated into his 2003 submission (it was the same 2002 artwork with the suggested changes) ... and won! If you have ever wondered why Damon is so comfortable discussing a wide range of topics, he was president of the debate club in high school. The critical thinking skills he learned help him see the positive. Damon is a creative force with many talents and he clearly enjoys what he does.

According to Lu, Damon is extremely competitive. So it is no surprise that when Damon isn’t coming up with a new sauce or rub creation for the growing line of Croix Valley Foods products, you might find him competing in Culinary Fight Club events, SCA events, World Food competition or KCBS events. Like Lu, Damon prefers a competition format that allows him the flexibility to showcase his creativity and not being locked into a certain look or flavor profiles. And when he isn’t competing, you will find him promoting cooking and grilling by making guest appearances on local TV or producing “how-to” videos.

One of his recipe creations is “Pig Wings” or pork shank. He developed the rub and cooking process that has fans lining up at the Taste of Wisconsin and the Bacon Bash each year until they sell out. This is a great example of planning ahead and then actually executing. The Holter’s simply don’t give up. One goal that

remains on the list is getting a KCBS Grand Champion Call – they have come close with a 3rd place finish. I have no doubt that this goal will be achieved too.

They are a force to be reckoned when they compete as a team, which they prefer. But, they aren’t afraid to compete individually or even against each other like they have at Culinary Fight Club events – With Lu taking 1st

and Damon taking 2nd in Minneapolis and Lu taking 3rd in Denver. Likewise, they also compete against each other at SCA events. It’s all part of the fun they have in everything they do.

The name Croix Valley Foods comes from their passion for the St. Croix River and the sport of fishing on the river that they both love. A business that started with a steak sauce has grown into a successful co-packer, a private label product producer and having over 20 products of their own. Their products are available in retail stores, their own retail store in the Keg and Case Market in St Paul, MN and via their website – croixvalleyfoods.com. Their best sellers include their Private Stock BBQ sauce and their Rhubarbecue sauce which is a great example of their fusion and flavor philosophy.

This growth and success is because of the trust Lu and Damon have in each other and their shared vision. They rely on their collective ability to execute on their ever growing plan. They believe in the brand they are building because the Croix Valley Foods brand represents



Lu “The Duchess of Pork” Holter showing off some of her competition hardware.




Damon and Lu Holter at their Croix Valley Foods retail store at the Keg and Case Market in St Paul, MN




Damon shows off some hardware the team won at the American Royal from a few years ago.

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who they are, not just products on a shelf. They are both proud of what they have accomplished together. Both Lu and Damon work on product development, but as you can image, Damon is already thinking about what they could try next. Building relationships is a hallmark for the Holter's and they choose their partners carefully - Gunter Wilhelm knives, Compart pork and Icon/Vision grills

They believe in giving back to their local community as well as the BBQ community. Locally, they support an organization called Crowning Achievements which is a program that boosts the confidence, independence, social skills and friendships for anyone over age 16 with a disability. On the BBQ circuit, last year they offered two scholarships with the help of their partners to new pro competition teams. Each team received proteins from Compart and Snake River Farms, rubs and sauces from Butcher's BBQ and Croix Valley Food and either a paid or donated entry

fee. Damon and Lu also set-up their cook site (as did other teams) next to the teams so they could offer assistance and mentoring during their first pro competition. It is an amazing gesture that builds the bench strength of the BBQ family.

So what's ahead for the Holter's and Croix Valley foods? Already announced is a monthly BBQ box subscription of Croix Valley products that includes their limited edition products that are currently only available at the Keg and Case Market location. Coming soon is a cookbook done in partnership with Vision Grills. And of course, they will be on the food competition circuit. If you see them, stop by and say hi. You never know what they might have on the grill to sample – iguana anyone? The ride these two have had is amazing! Croix Valley Foods can be found at croixvalleyfoods.com and you can also follow them on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.



The Croix Valley Foods retail store at the Keg and Case Market in St Paul, MN

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