



**BY: MARK &
GRETCHEN
NOORDSY**

Certified Judge
KCBS, SCA, EAT
mnbbq@outlook.com

In The World Of BBQ, It's The People You Meet

Photos Courtesy of **Mark Noordsy and Anne Lauer**

It was another hot day in Texas. The dry heat hit me in the face with a wind that did nothing but make me hotter. I needed a wide brimmed cowboy hat to shade me from the strong, bright sunshine. I'll bet this sounds like the opening to a novel. Well, this isn't a novel, but it is the story about how the Steak Cookoff Association (SCA) was founded and how it evolved to become the premier steak competition organization. In October, the SCA brought nearly 300 "golden ticket" winning steak cooks from across the globe to Fort Worth, Texas to compete in the SCA World Championship.

The SCA is the brainchild of Brett Gallaway and Ken Phillips. In late 2013, they envisioned the need for a sanctioning body for steak competitions and the SCA was born. The two had been successfully cooking at BBQ and steak events in the years leading up to their decision to start the SCA. Having already moved from the corporate world to running their own recruiting business for the hospitality industry in 2010, they knew their skills complemented each other's. Brett and Ken leveraged their knowledge of the hospitality business and their own contest experiences as the foundation for the SCA. Their premise was a simple one – rules anyone could understand, an efficient and fair judging process and an event where anyone can participate and have fun.

It didn't take long for the SCA to take off after its first



Left to Right - Brett Gallaway, Co-Founder of the SCA, Matt Ouverson, 2019 SCA Ace Hardware Points Chase Winner and Ken Phillips Co-Founder of the SCA



Left to Right – New Prime Judges Beth Salzl, Shannyn McArthur and Dan Salzl at the "Last Chance to the Dance" cookoff in Mason City, Iowa

event – The North Texas Steak Cookoff. By selecting a strong group of reps and equally strong promoters, the number of contests swelled in the US and international contests where not far behind. The SCA has grown from 19 sanctioned events in 2014 to potentially over 400 in 2020. Balancing the growing amount of SCA events on the weekends and running their recruiting business during the week began taking its toll. In 2018, they began devoting their full attention to the expansion of the SCA. Brett's wife Michelle and Ken's wife Leslie are also why the SCA is so successful - making it truly a family business.

While cooking the perfect steak is the foundation of the SCA, building a talented, objective pool of judges and volunteers is equally important. At any event, volunteers are needed to assist with steak selection, perform check-in or turn-in roles, table captain or whatever the SCA rep or contest promoter might need done. SCA recognizes this commitment to the sport by awarding a "Prime" designation to judges and volunteers who have served at 28 events. An interesting side note, 28 was chosen because it is the number of aging days required to create a great steak.

The SCA also provides opportunities for younger cooks to participate through the SCA Kids program for cooks ages 4 to 15. Parents can help prepare the fire, but it is up to the kids to prepare, cook and present their steak. It isn't just parents who get involved as many seasoned SCA cooks willingly

mentor the young up and coming cooks. This willingness to share their cooking knowledge is one of things that makes the SCA cooks unique. It's just part of the family atmosphere where everyone helps each other that is prevalent at SCA events. In 2020, the SCA will be working with Kids Q Nation to offer even more opportunities for the younger cooks.

2020 is shaping up to be another great year for the SCA. Ken and Brett are stars in the Legends of the Fire video series, their award winning steak rub is available in Ace Hardware stores and then there is the "notebook". They listen to all the ideas that come their way and Brett writes them down in a notebook for review and discussion. Take comment cards for example. They tried them and found out that they slowed down the judging process to the point it affected the actual steaks due to the oxidation that begins once a steak is cut. In fairness to all competitors and the steaks they turn in, that idea was tabled.

The SCA and its contests supports a long list of charities and organizations which are beneficiaries of many of the SCA contests. The list includes: Operation BBQ Relief, cancer, Shriners, autism, Rotary, Lions, food/hunger and first responder organizations – just to name a few. There is something in the SCA for everyone and a place where anyone can do what they do best. As an SCA judge/volunteer and cook, I frequently see this in action along with the words "how can I help?". If something needs to be done or someone needs help, there is always someone ready to lend a hand. This is what makes SCA fun to be part of. You can learn more by going to steakcookoffs.com.

"When you win, say little when you lose, say less"
Brett Gallaway and Ken Phillips

The SCA has two major contests that culminate in Fort Worth. The first is the Ace Hardware Points Chase. Cooks earn points at each contest they compete in – 11 for a first place down to 2 points for a 10th place finish. Any finish lower than 10th earns one point and, by the way, I earned 4 points in 2019. Oh, so close to being on stage. This year, Matt Ouversen from Norwalk, Iowa earned 344 points beating his nearest competitor, who earned 282 points, to re-



Left to Right – Future SCA champion Hanna Lauer, SCA Judge Mark Nordsy and SCA cook and mentor extraordinaire Dick Dahlen at the "Last Chance to the Dance" cookoff in Mason City, Iowa



The SCA is all about family. SCA Ace Hardware Points Chase Champion gets a congratulatory hug from his mom Cheryl

ceive the championship ring. Congratulations to Matt on his well deserved win and ring. He earned it!

This year I cooked against five of the top 10 SCA Ace Hardware Points Chase champions. Collectively now known as the Midwest 5 – Matt Ouversen (1st), Mark Huntley (5th), Sandy Brown (7th), Tim Brown (8th) and Troy Johnson (10th). Not getting a call at those contests was easier to take knowing they were in the field. Congratulations to them all on a great year!

The second major competition is the actual SCA World Championship. This is open to cooks that earned a Golden Ticket by winning an SCA steak contest, Ace Hardware Point Chase winners and Ace Hardware at-large points winners. This year nearly 300 cooks from all over the world competed with Robby Staggs from Texas coming out on top and Mark Huntley from Iowa taking 2nd.

A little more about Matt and his quest to win the Ace Points Chase. He ended 2018 by cooking in 13 contests and set a goal to make it to the SCA World Championships in 2019. In 2019, he took the SCA by storm by cooking in 87 competitions in 17 states covering over 47,000 miles (earning him the Road Warrior Award). Good thing Mark Huntley (5th in the Ace Hardware Points Chase and 2nd in the SCA World Championship) was along so they could keep each other awake on those late night drives. Plus,

they could discuss fine-tuning their techniques before the next contest. And, clearly, those discussions really paid off for both of them.

Matt is no stranger to competition cooking having cooked competition BBQ for ten years before focusing on steak. He took 3rd place at his first SCA event in Boone, Iowa three years ago and his competitive nature kicked in and he was hooked. To say Matt is competitive is an understatement. This year alone he won two SCA super qualifiers, won five contests and still found time to cook at the American Royal BBQ contest taking 16th place in sausage with his team "The Wicked Pig". For the past 3 years he has focused on, and perfected, cooking the perfect medium ribeye in SCA contests. Of course, cooking over 800 steaks a week while a chef when he was 18 didn't hurt his knowl-

edge of the protein.

Elevating the sport and steak cooking is next on Matt's agenda. He is working on ways to fundamentally change the way steaks are cooked and prepared. He has rubs and marinades under development along with potentially teaching a class on cooking the perfect steak. Matt hinted that it might be held in Florida – sounds like a perfect winter getaway to me! His tip for steak competitors is to hit the things you can control – doneness and appearance. After that, focus on the wow factor for that one bite the judges take. It might sound easy, but trust me, it isn't... but it is fun.

As I mentioned earlier, the SCA is international in scope. Having a Dutch heritage (note the double "oo" in Noordsy), it was natural that I set out to meet one of the two teams from the Netherlands that came to Fort Worth to compete. I met Rene Ausema and Wilma Jansen from Garderen, Netherlands and Remko Winkelaar from Putten, Netherlands. Rene and Remko form the Dutch BBQ Crew. The SCA steak competitions they compete in typically have 70 teams entered. The contests follow the SCA rules with the main difference being the ribeye itself. The ribeyes are much leaner and may have little or no spinalis. The Dutch crew competes in 4-6 steak contests each year across Belgium, Hungary, Italy, Austria and in the United Kingdom – not to mention coming to Fort Worth for the SCA Championships. They will end their trip in Dallas by competing in the World Food Championships. The Dutch BBQ Crew also compete in BBQ competitions across Europe, winning an international competition for whole hog. And here I thought Matt traveled a lot.

The Dutch BBQ Crew is no stranger to traveling across the US and experiencing the various BBQ styles that we have to offer. All this traveling led to Rene developing a line of rubs and sauces. These sauces are marketed in the Netherlands and are based on the regional styles of BBQ in the US. His award winning line is called Grate Goods and unfortunately isn't available in the US ... yet. Remko is the head chef, or should I say pitmaster, at his popular restaurant, T-



Left to Right – The Midwest 5 – Troy Johnson, Tim Brown, Sandy Brown, Mark Huntley and Matt Ouverson



Left to Right – The Dutch BBQ Crew - Rene Ausema and Remko Winkelaar

Rex, where he has been instrumental in introducing the US style of BBQ (cover down, low and slow smoking) to the Netherlands. Previously, what we would call grilling (cover up, higher heat cooking) is what they called BBQ. With his custom built smoker wafting the smell of BBQ across the countryside, he has become the "go to" BBQ restaurant. In

case you want to drop by next time you are in Putten, Netherlands, the sampler platter and his homemade sausage are the popular menu items

It was interesting to learn how the SCA family pulled together to get them the equipment they needed to compete at the SCA World Championships. It is pretty tough fitting a PK grill into the overhead bin or under the seat in front of you. A Facebook post two years ago caught the attention of Dick and Larry Dahlen from Minnesota and they offered to provide whatever Rene and Remko needed. A fast friendship developed and I found them comparing notes, sharing their steak rubs and competing side-by-side this year. It is amazing how the small the world can become.

In the world of BBQ ... it's the people you meet ... and the friends you make.

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