

flying judge



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# BBQ PROFILES

## BBQ Profile On Matt Barber; Hot Wachulas

This month we are truly looking at a BBQ Champion that has left his mark all over the World. He hails from Florida and has dominated the competition here, but has left his championship cooking mark in many states, many countries, and who knows where else. Matt Barber, competing under his team name of Hot Wachulas, has competed in over 200 contests around the World while earning more than 80 Grand and Reserve Championships in those events. More remarkable than the wins is the fact he has done this in a relatively short time of 12 years.

Early on Matt was making salsas and sauces and began looking for a name for his products. He tried numerous names, ran them past a trademark attorney, and each had a problem. This all happened before he got involved in BBQ. One afternoon as he was driving down I-4, he saw the turnoff to Wachula, Florida, and that hit him as the name he wanted to use. He bounced this off several friends in an Irish Pub in Lakeland one evening and that was his new product name. He researched the name and found it was the Seminole Indian word for the mating call of the Sand Hill Crane. Since he liked spicy foods, the Hot was added to become Hot Wachulas.

Matt was born in Alaska and raised in a military family, so he has lived in multiple places over his lifetime. His father was a Chaplain in the Air Force. He reflected on not having a very pleasant childhood as he moved many times. But as he reflects back about his adulthood, it has been a rich and rewarding lifestyle. He's seen a lot of the World and today he really appreciates those experiences in his lifetime. His family lived in Iran during the Iranian hostage crisis and those were some trying times. They had problems finding a place to live as the locals would not rent to a family that had kids. As an adult, he worked as an Art Director for Publix Grocers. He was also responsible for designing labels on food items sold in their stores, among other responsibilities. He didn't like what he was doing but felt he was doing a pretty admirable job. So he went looking for a career change.

At a company outing, he brought a BBQ sauce he had developed and it was a big hit. He began experimenting with Salsas and BBQ Sauces. His preliminary feedback proved the items were pretty good. This enticed him to start developing a serious interest and skill for cooking BBQ.

Today he has a broad range of both BBQ sauces and salsas. The day I visited him, he was cooking up a batch of peach BBQ sauce. I can't wait to try this one. He had a substantial order of sauces going out the door to a customer in Boston as well on that same day. He even develops sauces for some of the teams he competes against! These are very dear and secret recipes for these other teams, and Matt works hard to protect their interests. He is usually approached to develop products to meet specific needs. Thus he is always creating new and different creations for his customers. In addition to that, he also

vends the Hot Wachulas products at many of the contests where he competes. His full production facility is located at the Bartow Airport industrial park.

Early on, he sponsored the team Smokin Butts in their Florida BBQ events. He was providing sauces for them to use in their competition. As time passed by, they moved away from his sauces and started using others, but they still wanted his financial sponsorship. Matt felt like he could do as well on his own so he dropped his sponsorship and entered his first contest, which was the 2008 PigFest in Lakeland, Florida. He got a top 10 brisket call and has been hooked since then. He also vends his salsas and sauces which has helped fund his competitions.

As he moved forward, he operated for many years out of a small van. As he looks back on those years, Matt wonders how he ever made it, considering his equipment, but he did very well. Surprisingly, his first FBA contest was in Wachula, Florida. He feels he got serious about BBQ competitions around 2012, as he started doing about 30 contests a year. He moved up to what he called a box truck that had no team name or graphics on it. Just his equipment and a



white truck. I first met Matt in 2014 and was surprised that this guy, who wins so many contests, had such a plan looking rig. You would never guess he had the BBQ record that he has.

2015 was his best year by earning 11 Grand Championships. He has also won the FBA Team of the Year in 2013 and 2015. Now he is teaching cooking classes and they all virtually fill up early. In addition to conducting barbecue classes locally, he has taken his BBQ teaching skills to Romania, Slovenia, and Italy several times. He has plans to bring these successful classes to Amsterdam in the Netherlands and eventually, the United Kingdom. He leaves this week for his third trip to Northern Italy at Rein in Taufers, for the Winter Extreme South Tyrol BBQ Contest. Last year he won the Grand Championship at this event and they wanted him back again this year. He remarked how cold it was in Northern Italy in January.

Outside of Florida, he continues to leave a tremendous mark. He really enjoyed the contest in Lake Placid, New York, for the Brew and Q Invitational. In addition to competing in BBQ contests, he has also judged the Jack Daniels, the Washington D.C BBQ Battle, earned Reserve at the World Food two years ago, and 3rd place three years ago.

One of his proudest achievements was taking first place in Brisket at the American Royal BBQ this past year and he had to show me that trophy. His office is filled with shelves of trophies, awards, and memorabilia from these different events from around the World. He still has a thriving BBQ Sauce and Salsa business.

Today Matt travels to his competitions in an enormous fifth wheel unit with a sizeable and well-equipped kitchen. His rig also has large living quarters with a king-sized bed. Quite an improvement over the van and the white box truck. Matt serves on the Board of Directors of the Florida BBQ Association and heads up the Cook Team committee. He tries to compete in most of their contests. Matt is also very active in KCBS sanctioned events across the Southeast but also ventures around the country to attend even more events. He continues to look for ways to expand the reach of his product business by looking for new and interesting BBQ contests. Matt is also being creative about where he can take his successful cooking classes, and always looking for new horizons and challenges for the future. In 2019 he judged 10 FBA contests.

Regretfully the BBQ circuits are not as fun as they used to be. He feels the competition is more intense and the camaraderie among cook teams has changed. He still has a strong circle of friends in the BBQ World, but it is changing, and that, to Matt, is disappointing.

Matt is highly respected in the BBQ World and not just here in Florida. Sean Hylton, the organizer of the West Pasco BBQ Challenge, threw a birthday party for Matt during the awards ceremony with a cake and all the other extras included too. He fully intends to continue doing what has contributed to his success for many years. His only change will be improving on what he already does so well.

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