

THE NEW FACE OF BBQ

SOCIAL MEDIA SITES, PITMASTER PERSONALITIES AND A HOST OF TV SHOWS HAVE TURNED THE GRILL BUSINESS INTO A MEDIA HOTBED



A SURGE OF INTEREST IN GRILLING HAS THE casual dining experience evolving into a multimillion dollar year-round business with a vibrant social media scene following in its wake.

Traditionally viewed as a time-honored pastime or rite of passage signaling the onset of summer, the new business of grilling is about being a business.

"The business of barbecue is experiencing enormous growth," said Brian Hilligoss, executive director of the National Barbecue Association (nbbqa.org). The Naperville, Ill.-based organization's objective is to promote the recognition and image of the industry, facilitate effective networking of industry

resources, foster new business for its members and educate and inform the public about the art and enjoyment of barbecue.

Like most industries, marketing and promotional tactics are essential for product growth. Unlike the 1960s through the 1980s when advertising was a billion-dollar business and ad agencies, as portrayed in AMC's *Mad Men*, were all the hype, today's economy has forced marketers to look for alternative avenues to tout products and services, catapulting social media to a mainstream marketing tool.

FACEBOOK FORWARD

"Social media is essential to growing your business," said Marcus Gilmer, newsroom so-

Restaurant owner Lee Ann Whippen of Chicago q turned her passion for grilling into a business.

cial media manager at the *San Francisco Chronicle*. "It's a way to get information out about your product as well as a means to gauge consumer interest. It also helps keep up with the competition."

Gilmer has earmarked Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest as the top social platforms suitable for business, noting each serves a different function. Facebook, he said, is a way to share product and company information, engage followers in conversation and receive helpful feedback.

Think of Twitter as a customer service department. "Tweeting is an in-the-moment

barometer for what's going on," Gilmer said. "If people have a complaint, they will tweet about it."

Pinterest he likened to a reference center. "The lifespan of what is put on Pinterest is substantial. It's a way to archive information," Gilmer said.

The bottom line is that social media is an inexpensive way to promote, monitor and get consumer feedback – and for the barbecue industry, it is on the rise. "With the viral nature of social media one post can reach a huge audience instantly," Gilmer said. "It's a cost-effective way to get exposure and takes little effort to initiate."

COOKING UP A GAME PLAN

While there is much exposure to be garnered via social media, the first key step is the initial brand awareness.

“Social media has a direct business-to-consumer advantage and presents a quickly evolving landscape, but can be a challenge to navigate,” said Janet Isabelli, founder of Isabelli Media Relations and former team leader for the Midwest office of Wagstaff Worldwide.

“It is crucial for businesses to employ a strategic marketing plan and public relations campaign to reach its desired audience,” said Isabelli, who worked with Donald Trump, spearheading the team that opened Trump International Hotel & Tower Chicago. “Third party endorsements cannot be purchased, and accordingly it’s that kind of coverage that most incites a call to action by consumers.”

If marketing and media exposure is the cornerstone of success, networking is the way to stay abreast of industry trends.

Joining an organization, such as the National Barbecue Association, offers exposure to some of the big names in the business. For instance, it is where the voice of Dave Anderson, founder of Famous Dave’s (famousdaves.com), can be heard. The chain, headquartered in Minnetonka, Minn., has garnered more than 700 awards and prides itself on its passion for serving up authentic barbecue. Due to the importance of having an online presence, the company just relaunched its website last month making it easier to order food online and via its mobile devices, view promotions and events, and browse and interactive menu. Its Facebook page has 400,000 Likes and there are 30,000 followers of the company on Twitter.

Being part of an organiza-



Janet Isabelli, founder of Isabelli Media Relations, says social media offers advantages.

tion or association can help connect or inform people with online communities such as Amazingribs.com. It is regarded for its information on barbecue, grilling and outdoor cooking offering recipes, tips and techniques, and equipment reviews. It is also one of the 50 most popular food websites in the country, according to comScore and Quantcast.

“We have webinar discussions, technology information, comment pages and product reviews,” said Max Good, vice president and product reviewer at Amazingribs.com. “We are adamant about remaining objective, offering meaningful and useful information,” he said.

According to Good, who is affectionately known as the

“Flame Keeper,” the benchmark of great grilling depends on the right tools – and accessories are trending at a rapid rate. “Most grills are built to last a good while so the biggest things now are accessories.”

A HIT IN THE PIT

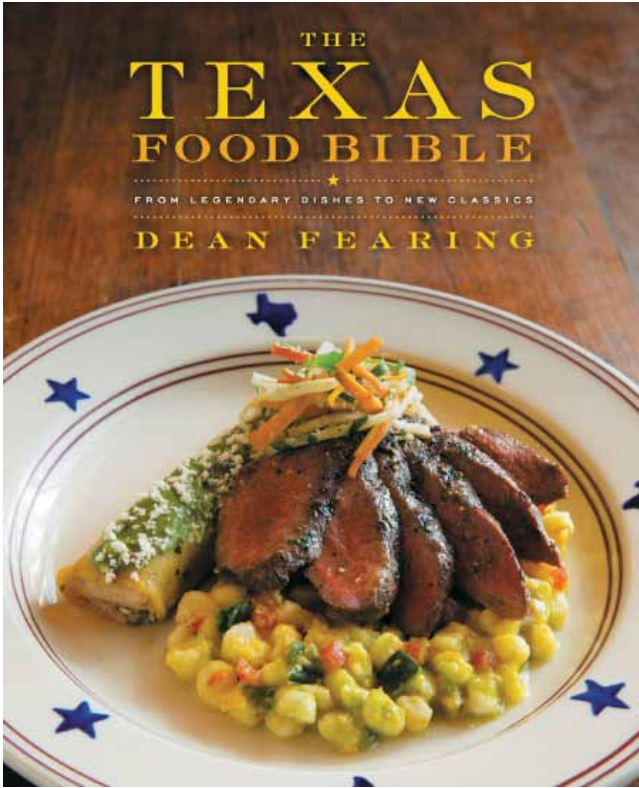
Another area that has kept barbecue in the limelight both in print, online and on TV are the pitmasters, personalities and celebrities like Food Network’s Bobby Flay who has certainly helped catapult grilling into the mainstream.

For famed pitmaster Lee Ann Whippen, who turned her love for grilling into a business, opening hotspot Chicago q (chicagoqrestaurant.com) in Chicago’s tony Gold Coast, it’s also about innovation and creativity. The restaurant is billed as the modern urban barbecue experience.

Whippen is a member of the Kansas City Barbecue Society and has more than 14 years of experience cooking competitive barbecue. “Barbecue is my passion,” said Whippen, whose smoked rack of lamb with white barbecue sauce took second place in the World Food Championships’ barbecue segment in November 2013.



Amazingribs.com’s Max Good is product reviewer and “Flame Keeper.”



Dean Fearing's cookbook, *The Texas Food Bible*, has recipes, tips and techniques.

For the novice there's plenty of reference materials to help master the art of grilling to be just the like famous folks, including James Beard Award-winning chef Dean Fearing's recently released cookbook *The Texas Food Bible: From Legendary Dishes to New Classics* (Grand Central Life & Style; \$30). The book by Fearing, who is based at the Ritz-Carlton in Dallas, includes recipes for spice blends and mixes (see recipe for Fearing's barbecue spice blend) along with step-by-step methods and techniques for grilling, smoking and braising in the traditional Southwestern manner.

Another of the Food Network's vibrant personalities, Guy Fieri, with Ann Volkwein, offers this new back to basics book: *Guy on Fire: Grilling, Tailgating, Camping and More!* (HarperCollins, \$29.99). The book, which debuted last May, features 130 recipes.

JUST GRILL IT

A final note on the business of grilling comes from Texas homemaker-turned-businesswoman Leslie Haywood, who is living the American Dream.

In 2013 Haywood appeared on ABC's *Shark Tank* with her Grill Charms, an accessory that helps keep grilled preferences straight. Haywood's product had the investors vying for a partnership. Selecting "shark" Robert Herjavec, the savvy entrepreneur netted a deal with home and kitchen consumer products distributor Fox Run Brands, and has popped up on the Home Shopping Network where she reportedly sold 1,600 units in a day. A media star is born!

"Grilling has been trending for years and the accessories market is exploding," Haywood said. "People are looking for new, fun and different products." **CL**

DEAN FEARING'S BARBECUE SPICE BLEND

Use on anything: roasted, grilled, smoked or fried
Makes three-fourths of a cup

- ¼ cup Pendery's Chile powder blend (see note)
- 1 Tablespoon ground chipotle Chile
- 1 Tablespoon ground dried ancho Chile
- 1 Tablespoon hickory-smoked salt
- 1 Tablespoon sugar
- 1 Tablespoon cayenne pepper
- 1 Tablespoon paprika
- 1 Tablespoon smoked paprika
- ½ Tablespoon ground cumin
- ½ Tablespoon granulated garlic
- ½ Tablespoon Aleppo pepper
- ¼ Tablespoon freshly ground pepper

Place the Pendery's Chile powder in a small bowl. Add the remaining ingredients and stir to combine. Store, tightly covered, in a cool dark spot until ready to use. Keeps for three months.

*Pendery's spice can be ordered from Pendery's world of Chiles and Spices: (800) 533-1870; www.penderys.com.



Keep guests' grilling preferences straight with these classy grill charms designed by Leslie Haywood.

STAY CONNECTED

SOCIAL MEDIA IS A WAY TO TAP INTO EVERYTHING going on in the industry: new products, developing trends, trade shows, competitions, charitable endeavors and more.

Here are a few communities to connect with:

AMERICAN ROYAL: (www.facebook.com/pages/the-american-royal/89279823538): The organization is the granddaddy of competitive events and in 1980 launched the prestigious American Royal World Series of Barbecue. Last year an estimated 69,000 attended the event.

GRILLING COMPANION: (www.facebook.com/grillingcompanion): Keep on trend with recipes and tips.

OPERATION BARBECUE RELIEF: (www.facebook.com/operationbbqrelief): Stay connected with philanthropic and disaster relief programs with which the barbecue industry is involved.

INTERNATIONAL BARBECUE COOKERS ASSOCIATION: (www.facebook.com/ibbqa.org): The organization's mission statement says it all: "To develop and bolster equitable competitive barbecue cooking internationally." Anything you ever

wanted to know about competitions you can learn here.

HEARTH, PATIO AND BARBECUE EXPO: (www.hpbexpo.com): While trade shows like the National Restaurant Association's show are beneficial, this targeted event is geared totally to the industry. Follow the progress on Twitter.


WEBER: (www.facebook.com/weberbbq): As a business and manufacturer, Weber has one of the most informative websites. It's not only useful to purchasers of its products, but loaded with industry information that includes facts and sur-

veys that keep up with what's trending in the industry.

The following were mentioned in the main story:

NATIONAL BARBECUE ASSOCIATION: www.nbbqa.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid+=1

AMAZINGRIBS.COM: (www.facebook.com/AmazingRibs?fref=nl)

KANSAS CITY BARBEQUE SOCIETY: (www.facebook.com/KansasCityBarbequeSociety). 





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