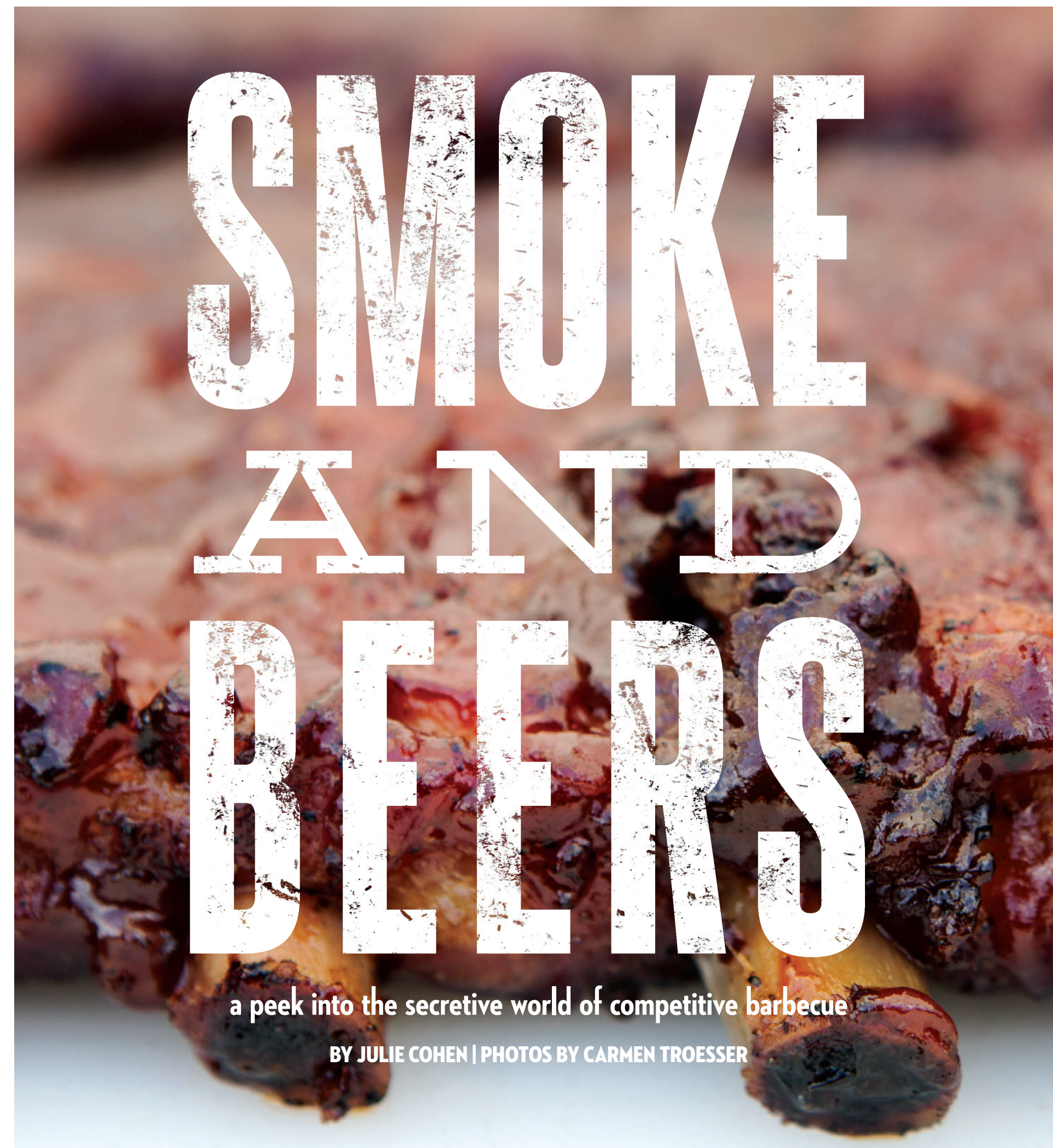


Ron Wakefield, mayor of Ellington,  
Mo., digs into some ribs at a local  
barbecue competition.

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# SMOKE AND BEERS

a peek into the secretive world of competitive barbecue

BY JULIE COHEN | PHOTOS BY CARMEN TROESSER



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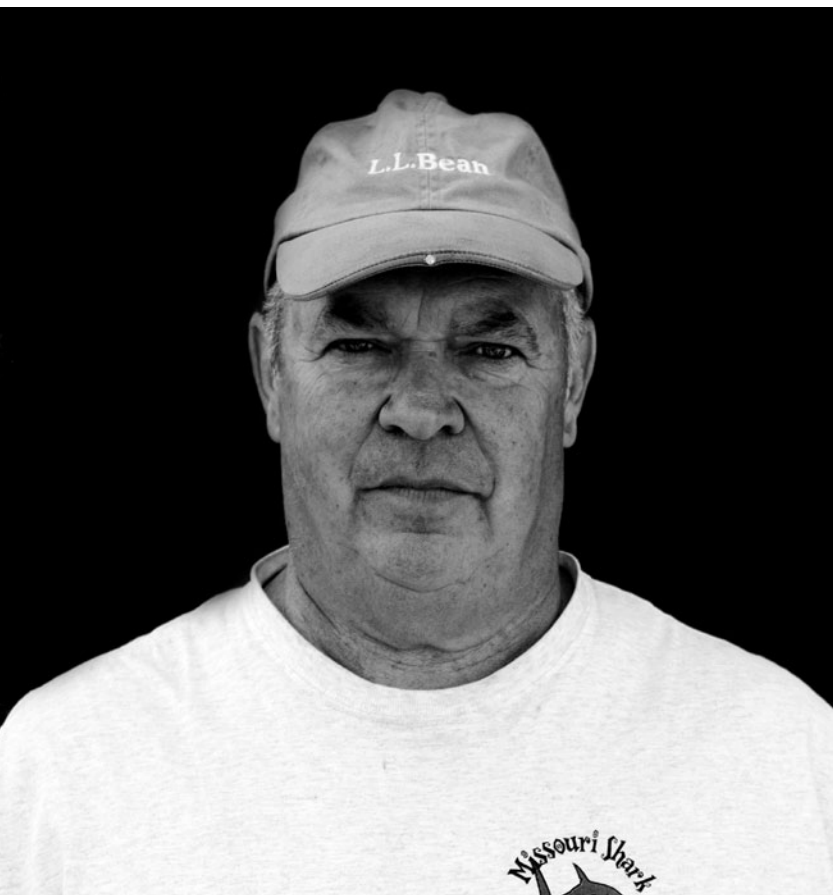
MATT RIORDAN

*president*



ROBIN BROWN

*COUSIN*



JIM FORBIS

*master sgt*



JERRY FRICHTEL

*KB*

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t 12:35 p.m., Matt Riordan lifts the lid off the grill to reveal what appear to be 18 chicken breasts. I move in for a closer look but, mainly, to feel the heat. For although it's mid-April and the sun is directly overhead, the crisp air reminds me that winter has not yet loosened her fingers around

spring. Peeling back the foil from an aluminum pan, Riordan sets his Miller down, wrapped in a black koozie emblazoned with the words "Missouri Shark Fisherman's Club." With a basting brush, he lovingly paints each piece of Frankenstein Chicken with an extra coat of secret sauce.

I've tasted the sauce a handful of times. Every time I see the Missouri Shark Fisherman's Club, one of the four teammates, their average age teetering around 59, urges a shot glass of it at me, daring me, once again, to guess the ingredients. From what I can discern, it's a mix of ketchup, brown sugar, dry mustard and a handful of flavors I can't quite place. I don't push them for the recipe, though – I've seen other teams try. "Cinnamon Toast Crunch and Cheerios," Robin Brown, fellow Shark and Riordan's "cousin-in-law," likes to say.

While Brown, Jim Forbis and Jerry Frichtel refer to the secret sauce as "World Famous Barbecue Sauce that Matt invented," Riordan is quick to admit he got the recipe from the son of his daughter's orthodontist and tweaked it to make it his own. "I've never had an original thought in my head," he joked the first time I met him.

"And I'm a putz!" Brown chimed in.

As for the barbecued chicken breasts, they're not actually breasts, but rather thighs with the knuckles cut off and the dark blood-red veins removed. The remaining meat is trimmed down into uniform rectangles and then cloaked in a thin layer of skin; it's been slowly tenderizing on the grill since 11:30 a.m. The skin is also

uniform, pulled taut around each rectangle, like fondant smoothed around the edges of a wedding cake, prepared in an elaborate, deconstructed, twice-baked potato fashion. "It's a monster to do," Brown says, having sidled up next to Riordan at the grill, with a twin can of koozie-covered Miller in hand. This morning, Riordan elaborates, the skin was peeled off the thighs, the fat scraped off, then the underside of the skin seasoned and re-wrapped around the meat. The Frankenstein moniker is making more sense. But why the hassle? "So when the judges bite through the skin, it tears instead of all of it sliding off," Brown explains with a shrug. "A judge might only take one bite," he adds. "It has to be perfect."

Perhaps it's the heat from the grill and smokers, but in just a few minutes, the weather seems to spike several degrees. Last night was a punishing one for the Sharks, along with the other 16 teams competing in the Florissant Fraternal Fires & BBQ. With temperatures in the mid 30s, and the teams' tents and trailers parked on an elevated grassy field in North County, the wind whipping across the knoll made the night feel even colder. The Sharks toughed it out as they always do. After all, the 2013 competitive barbecue season kicks off in January with the Webster Groves Freeze-Que and lasts through October. Over the six years the Sharks have been a team, they've learned that severe weather conditions are just part of the game. Yet Brown is quick to rat out his buddy from A Pig's Worst Nightmare. "In the middle of the night, Frank snuck off to his truck to warm his hands," he whispers in a conspirator's tone. "We've been giving him crap about it all day."

The Sharks and Pigs always try to set up shop next to each other at competitions, perhaps following the adage "keep your friends close and your enemies closer." Whereas the Sharks tout simple black hoodies with a white cartoon shark, ringed in by their team name, the Pigs wear bright orange – showcased in an array of A Pig's Worst Nightmare jackets, T-shirts, golf shirts, hoodies and ball caps. By the looks of the amount of people donning Pig regalia under the tent next door, the team must be three times larger than the Sharks. "They're not all the team," Forbis tells me, referring to a smattering of women, children and friends also wearing

Pig gear. "That's just because they have sponsors." He stoically sighs. "They're always wearing something new."

"Hey Julie, you know what a pig's worst nightmare is?" Brown asks, overhearing our conversation. Although I know the punch line to the joke, having heard it several times since first meeting the Sharks, I play along.

"What?" I say.

"A shark!" He shouts while the rest of us laugh.

The Pigs might have great clothes but, as Brown proudly points out, they don't have koozies. They don't have the Sharks' ride, either. During one competition around "beer-thirty," the team slapped a decal (precisely centered, remarkably) of the logo from their hoodies on the shiny black trailer that houses their grills and equipment. The trailer also serves as a camper of sorts – some of the Sharks sleep on recliners on its floor during weekend competitions.

In competition, a "shark" connotes a person who takes advantage of his rivals by hiding his skills until the moment just before he strikes – a reference which makes sense for a competitive team. However, just as everything the Sharks say has an element of self-deprecation, so does their name.

For years, they've been going on family vacations together to Florida. "We always go fishing for shark but never catch one," Brown tells me. "Never catch anything more than a catfish," Riordan adds. In jest, the guys started calling themselves the "Missouri Shark Fisherman's Club." Riordan even printed shirts.

Then, eight years ago, Frank Schmer, owner of St. Louis Home Fires, a store in Ballwin that specializes in fireplaces and grills, held his first barbecue competition in the store's small parking lot. Nine teams came out to compete, along with about 250 spectators. After the success of the inaugural event, Schmer founded the St. Louis Barbecue Society. The following year, Riordan, Brown, Frichtel and Forbis attended the competition. As they wandered through the tents, the smoke seeping into their pores, Brown said to his buddies, "Next year we're doing this."

After the teams submit their entries to the judges, “frenemies” become friends, gathering to toast everyone’s hard work – and grab another cold one.



At 12:45 p.m., Riordan pulls the rectangles of chicken off the grill and moves them to a cutting board in the prep tent. We’re entering the first window – the 15 minutes before turn-ins when the jabs and jokes between teams’ tents turn to an eerie silence as each team focuses on finishing its entry, possibly even setting down a koozie in the process. The wind and a band playing classic rock covers are the only sounds to be heard across the knoll.

Prizes can range greatly at these competitions. At one, the Pigs won a whopping \$7,777 for nabbing grand champion; other times, the purse can be as low as \$100. Today at Fraternal Fires, the overall grand champion will take home \$1,000. Winning St. Louis teams often

At a quarterly SLBS General Assembly meeting held at PM BBQ last January, I witnessed the words in action, as the new board of directors was sworn in for 2013. With spatulas raised in their right hands, in front of around 80 society members, they repeated the statement in mock-seriousness; Dieckhaus mouthed at me from across the room: “We’re a cult.”

The prep tent isn’t exactly Kitchen Stadium, seeing as two of the Sharks slept on cots in the center of it the night before. There’s a lawn chair, a makeshift countertop, a couple coolers and some red-stained plastic cups (remnants from the bloody mary turn-in at 8:30 this morning). A large metal tool chest on wheels doesn’t house screwdrivers and hammers but rather knives, tongs,

Sharks decided that, since the turn-in is 2:30 p.m., the brisket needed to hit the coals at 4:30 a.m. The pork butt’s turn-in is 2 p.m., which means it went on at 10 o’clock last night. If the elements behave as predicted, the meats should come out as flavorful and succulent as the Sharks’ prowess allows. But if the weather spikes or dips without warning – or the wind picks up or completely dies – the meat could be under- or overcooked. There are two schools of thought for competitive barbecuing: hot and fast or slow and low. The Sharks follow the latter. “Or slow and low until you have 40 minutes left and your ribs aren’t done,” Brown says. “Then you do hot and fast.”

Six years of experience might make one wonder the point of having the times so painstakingly written out when, by

“ Other people have their boats or jet skis. Some of us have over \$10,000 in [barbecue] equipment in our backyards; IT’S JUST WHAT WE DO. ”

Matt Dieckhaus, membership director for SLBS and member of Smokin’ Dave’s BBQ team

advance to national competitions, and some have even gone on to open successful barbecue joints around town. PM BBQ and BBQ ASAP both got their starts serving ribs and chicken to a panel of barbecue judges. Yet money, breakaway businesses and bragging rights seem to be only secondary motivators in the passionate world of competitive barbecue. “Often you spend two hundred to win a hundred,” a member of team Bald-B-Que told me at one event. “If you’re doing it to make money, you ain’t gonna,” Brown reiterated. Matt Dieckhaus, membership director for the SLBS and member of Smokin’ Dave’s team, further explained, “Other people have their boats or Jet Skis. Some of us have over \$10,000 in [barbecue] equipment in our backyards; it’s just what we do.”

According to the SLBS’ mission statement, what they do is “promote the art of barbecuing and grilling as an opportunity to unite friends and family, to learn and experience while sharing knowledge of the Great American culture, so our youth may carry on the traditions.”

basting brushes, whisks and even an ice cream scoop. Propped in the middle of the tent is the most important and impressive piece of the Sharks’ arsenal: a standup white-board. On the board, carefully printed in black marker, is each category’s firing time and turn-in time. Scrawled at the bottom is a set of additional times:

Toast:  
1:07  
1:37  
2:07  
2:37

“Those are written in stone,” Brown says, solemnly. “Just as important as the other times. Wait and see.”

While the warming sunshine is welcome, it’s also troubling. As the white board dictates: The chicken’s turn-in is at 1 p.m., which means the Sharks needed Frankenstein to go on the grill at 11:30 a.m. For some of the other cuts, like the brisket, timing gets trickier. For this competition, the

now, they probably come as second nature; but experience is exactly why the Sharks created the white board in the first place. Sometimes the cases of beer (Miller Light for Brown and Riordan; Busch for Frichtel; and Bud Light for Forbis – “Not everyone doesn’t have to watch his figure,” Forbis says pointedly to lanky Frichtel’s can.) disappear faster than the Sharks realize. Sometimes the early morning wake-up call for the brisket comes, and no one has even remembered to go to sleep. And sometimes the moon gets chased, “but not in my underpants for at least four competitions now,” Brown assures me.

At 12:50 p.m., Forbis pulls a Styrofoam takeout box from a cooler and places it on the makeshift countertop. Inside the box is a bed of bright green parsley that will become the chicken’s center stage. From the 18 chicken rectangles, the men choose six, the most identical in appearance, for each piece can’t be more than ¼-inch different in size. They show me that, when they’re extra concerned about the bird’s doneness, the “squeeze test” can at least assuage any fear of getting disqualified. If the squeeze produces

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# “A judge might only take one bite. It has to be PERFECT.”

Robin Brown, member, Missouri Sharks Fisherman's Club

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clear juice, they're in the clear; but if it's red, the chicken will be DQed. As for flavor, the most the Sharks can do is sample the cast-off rectangles – which prove to be shakingly soft and insanely tender – and hope that the six chosen warriors have the same qualities.

From the front, if a scalpel, needle driver and suture scissors were subbed in for the knife, tongs and collection of empty beer cans, the Sharks could be mistaken for surgeons based on their serious and drawn visages as they scrutinize the rectangles. Yet from the back, in their faded blue jeans, worn sneakers and matching black hoodies, the Sharks look more like, as Dieckhaus warned me, a cult; a really fun cult.

Once the six rectangles are chosen, Riordan lifts each one with tongs and lays it gingerly in the box as if playing a game of Operation. He spaces each piece equal distance from the next and then grabs a mini spray bottle and gives each a spritz, making them appear even more moist and appetizing. “I can't tell you what's in here,” he says even before I ask. “No one knows.”

Although every competition is a group effort, the Sharks have learned one another's strengths over the years. Riordan's forte is plating, cutting and smoking; Brown's is grilling and ribs; Forbis is best at grilling and pork steaks; and Frichtel excels in cocktails, chili and being KB. I'm not sure if the Sharks always use this acronym for Kitchen Bitch – they also say D.A.L. instead of Dead Ass Last – or if it's just when I'm around. Part of being KB is walking the entry to the judges station during the turn-in window, Forbis explains. Riordan is

no longer allowed to be KB. “One time he scratched his nose and [the food] almost slid off the plate,” Frichtel says, he and Forbis smiling in Riordan's direction. Their laughter abruptly stops. It's time. Frichtel holds out his hands, in which Riordan slowly lowers the plated box. Like a waiter carrying a martini through a crowded bar, Frichtel, along with a representative from each of the 16 other teams, traverses the grassy knoll, through the picnic pavilion and across a parking lot to the small building where six judges await.

“We had to learn to not do it how we liked it,” Brown says as we watch Frichtel carefully picking his path. Although the judges go through a class sponsored by the SLBS that trains them on a ranking system based on taste, tenderness and appearance, it's essentially a matter of personal preference. Brown might like his chicken with a kick, but four of the judges might hate spice. I'm told that St. Louis judges lean toward sweet over savory, so the Sharks have had to learn how to adjust. A whole sandwich of sweet and sticky pulled pork might taste too saccharine, but just a mouthful could win first prize. “It's a crap shoot,” Riordan says. “A day where you think you're going to get last place, you might win.”

For the first few years, the Sharks had a penchant for winning the open categories – typically non-meat categories like the bloody mary competition or chili or dessert. “Everyone used to laugh at us when we kept winning only those,” Brown said. At last year's Jakey in June, as legend has it, the Sharks stole a glass of A Pig's Worst Nightmare's pitcher of margaritas, poured a can of Lime-A-Rita in and then turned in the concoction as their own. This is the part of the story that none of the Sharks can get through without cracking up. When the margarita competition results were announced, the Sharks received first – ahead of A Pig's Worst Nightmare.

“Our ribs are getting better, though,” Brown says, fluidly pulling the tab off his empty Miller and throwing it in a pile for charity while opening another can. Ribs seem to be the measure of all things. Despite what we've been taught, the Sharks explain to me that, when properly cooked, slabs of smoky, sweet ribs should tug instead of melt off the bone.

With Frichtel having returned, at 1:07 p.m., it's time for the first toast. Like a call to prayer, team members, friends, spouses and grandchildren meet in the few feet between frenemy lines. Frank Bowlin, the infamous A Pig's Worst Nightmare hand-warmer, raises a beer and booms in a voice as big as his body. “Friends, competitors, let us toast our first chicken turn-in.” He adds a few more words as everyone, including a stray middle school-aged boy who may or may not be trying to pass off a beer as a soda in his koozie, raises their cans.

“He's got a way with words, don't he? A real silver tongue,” someone shouts.

“Well, I'm not just a pretty face,” Bowlin responds, cupping his hands underneath his cheeks.

The toast quickly disbands. It's 20 minutes until the rib turn-in, and there is still work to be done.

**T**he Missouri Shark Fisherman's Club love to use me as a tool to further their jokes. “Hey, when I introduce you to Steve,” Brown said to me at a charity event over the winter, referring to a friend who often attends the competitions but isn't on a team, “You say, ‘Oh Steve, you're the groupie? Right?’” This time, Brown's instructions are: “Go tell Dieckhaus his chicken got DQed.”

I nod and dutifully trot past tents for 2 Sauced 2 Q, Big Dick's BBQ and Will Grill for Beer to arrive at Smokin' Dave's. Dieckhaus has his back to me; his 6-foot-5-inch frame is hunched over his workstation, where he is carefully plating his team's ribs – six in a row, contrary to Riordan's Lincoln-log technique of layering. “Hi Matt,” I say, “Did you hear that your chicken got disqualified?”

“Who told you that?” he asks, narrowing his eyes.

“I overheard it ... from a judge,” I shrug. “Just now.”

“Robin put you up to this, didn't he?” Dieckhaus says. He laughs loud and long. “It was one time! One time!”

When I get back to the Sharks, Riordan is handing over the plated box of ribs, like a newborn baby, into Frichtel's outstretched arms.

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In a few hours, the Sharks will find out that their ribs have taken first prize. They'll place eighth overall, their chicken missing second by just nine-tenths of a point to place third. The rest of their entries won't do quite as well – the weather will eventually reach the mid-60s, throwing off the remaining categories' cook times.

Two weeks later at Smokin' in the Park, their next competition in Smithton, Ill., they'll win Grand Champion, qualifying them to compete in the American Royal World Series of Barbecue Invitational. Widely considered the Super Bowl of competitive barbecue, the American Royal is a monumental accomplishment, one the Sharks never deemed fathomable.

**B**ut at this moment, at 1:27 p.m., as Forbis, Brown and Riordan watch Frichtel's black hoodie, slowly shrinking in the distance, their only thought is on 1:37: the next toast.

As I prepare to leave and we talk about which summer competition I'll come to, I ask them, “What's a pigs worst nightmare?”

Riordan points at me and smiles. “A shark.” **S**