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SMOKIN'

HOT

How three caterers who specialize in barbecue meet the growing demand for this down-home cuisine

BY SARA PEREZ WEBBER



"Barbecue may not be the road to world peace, but it's a start."
—Anthony Bourdain

Perhaps because it's associated with large, fun-filled gatherings—or maybe just because it's so darn tasty—consumers continue to go hog-wild for barbecue-style cuisine. Three caterers who specialize in barbecue tell us about their menus, their customers and how they're satisfying a need for good, old-fashioned comfort food.



This page: Nick, a Bar None team member since 2003, prepares entrees for a winery wedding (above); Bar None's custom-made chuckwagons. Opposite, clockwise from top: Santa Maria-style chicken and ribs on the grill alongside Bar None's house-made barbecue sauce and zesty ranch beans; Brigitte Zeiss and Greg Newman, founders and owners of Bar None Barbecue; a Western-themed corporate event; preparing entrees for an event.

Bar None caters about 300 events a year, with 80 percent of its business corporate events. Newman says barbecue has grown more popular for more formal social events as well. "Brides and grooms have learned that a barbecue menu at a wedding is the best way to get the highest quality food within a reasonable budget," he says.

Although the company can provide drop-off catering, "we prefer not to," says Newman. "It's not the same as having us out on site with our chuckwagon and freshly grilled entrees. We like to serve off the chuckwagon as much as possible when it comes to items like hot dogs, hamburgers and veggie burgers. Our guests absolutely love this!"

The company's chuckwagons are custom-made, utilizing handmade wheels and axles from Ohio's Amish Country. A specialty welder in San Diego builds the iron box, hand-crank and gears, and the grill screen itself, and then affixes the axles, wheels and wood to the grill box. The chuckwagons are transported on trailers with long ramps and heavy-duty winches to assist in rolling them off at events. "We use a roofer-quality propane torch to light the real wood logs, and then remove the torch to let the wood fire do the rest," says Newman. "There are no propane jets or burners on our grills, and we only use full-size, red-oak wood logs to cook our meats. We never take the easy way out by using charcoal, wood briquettes or lighter fluid, because all of these items would negatively affect the flavor."

The company follows another rule instituted when it launched in May 1998: It only caters

three events per day, a philosophy that Newman credits for Bar None's success over almost two decades. "Almost 80 percent of businesses fail within the first 18 months, and an even more staggering number is that approximately 96 percent of businesses fail within 10 years," he says. "A lot of businesses fail quickly due to inexperience, but we feel that even more businesses fail because they get greedy and start chasing the dollar. ... If a client wants a date [already booked] or requests items or services that we don't specialize in, we will politely bow out and do our best to recommend another caterer for them. It helps the customer, and builds goodwill with other San Diego catering companies."

Building strong relationships with customers has also been a key to growing the business. "Our best marketing is truly word-of-mouth from happy clients due to our unrelenting commitment to exceeding expectations," says Newman. "We keep in touch with our current customers through email marketing, special customer-only offers, and sending postcards to both returning and potential customers, offering specials and discounts. Additionally, we have a very detailed website and we keep current with blog postings about recent events as well as posting to our Facebook, Twitter and Instagram pages. We have discovered that more and more of our clients are making purchasing decisions through social media and interactions."

For 19 years, Bar None Barbecue has been serving up Santa Maria-style barbecue to fans in San Diego, who can tell they're at a Bar None event when they see the company's 6-foot-long, 1,000-pound chuckwagon.

"We cook all of the entrees that we offer over a live red-oak wood fire on our custom-made chuckwagons," says Greg Newman, president of Bar None. "Using only real wood logs makes a huge difference in flavor."

The red oak and the chuckwagon with a hand crank "that allows us to control the heat and cooking time by lowering and lifting the grill over the fire to the desired distance from the heat" differentiates Santa Maria-style barbecue, which is native to California, from other varieties, says Newman. Other hallmarks include using a dry rub instead of a wet rub or marinade; and featuring the cut of meat known as a tri-tip roast, which is the signature item of Santa Maria barbecue.

"In truly traditional Santa Maria menus, there would be no barbecue sauce but fresh salsa as a condiment, pinto beans instead of pinto beans, and garlic toast rather than ranch rolls," says Newman. "We have fine-tuned the traditional-style menu for our clients here in San Diego by creating our own barbecue sauce, an extremely popular pinto bean side dish, and a softer roll that can be used to sop up all the meaty juiciness."

BAR NONE BARBECUE

SAN DIEGO ●●● barnonebbq.com





P.I.G.S. BBQ CATERING

FREDERICK, MD. ●●● porkisgoodstuff.com

When Lisa and Roddy O'Connell launched P.I.G.S. BBQ Catering in Frederick, Md., in late fall 2010, they expected it to be a side gig. The couple were part-owners in an Italian restaurant, and Roddy enjoyed barbecuing with friends at home. "I started spending a lot of money on barbecue equipment, and Lisa said if we are going to spend all this money, we might as well try to recoup our investment," he says. "It's incredible that it evolved into the business that we have."

Even the company's name was somewhat of a jokey afterthought. When establishing an LLC, "we couldn't think of a name, so we said, 'Let's just call it Pigs,'" says Lisa. Once the business started taking off, they made the name into an acronym—Pork Is Good Stuff. Then, when wedding business picked up, "I worried people would be hesitant to say, 'My wedding is being catered by P.I.G.S.," laughs Lisa. "But we've built such a name for ourselves, it's not weird anymore."

In fact, wedding business has been booming since P.I.G.S. catered its first one in 2012. The company caters hundreds of events each year—both drop-off and full-service, from birthday parties to graduations to corporate parties. "We cater to a wide price point and style—everything from laid-back pig roasts to high-end Southern, and everything in between," says Lisa. Weddings are now the company's main focus, however; it catered 164 last year, which has led to an evolution of its menu. While it's always offered classic Southern barbecue—pulled pork, brisket, smoked bone-in chicken—P.I.G.S. now features an extensive hors d'oeuvres menu of Southern classics turned into bite-sized appetizers, such as pimento grilled cheese with heirloom tomato soup shooter, house-smoked

Berkshire pork belly with crème fraîche and spiced apples, and mini Maryland crab cakes, with such seasonal garnishes as Meyer lemon aioli, green apple and dill. The refined appetizers create the "perfect balance" with such hearty entrees as pulled pork and mac-and-cheese, notes Roddy.

With many of its ingredients regionally sourced—whole hogs from a meat market 10 miles away, produce from local Amish farmers, grits made from Virginia corn, applewood for smoking from nearby orchards, and, of course, crabs from Maryland waters—the company specializes in making everything from scratch, including barbecue sauces and rubs from Roddy's recipes. P.I.G.S. also sets itself apart by preparing "as much on site as we possibly can," says Lisa. "We pull pork shoulder, slice brisket, mix coleslaw. We are not cooking everything at the catering facility and bringing it over; we're frying the chicken on site, making the grits on site, sautéing the shrimp there, frying the green tomatoes."

Bringing all of their own cooking equipment to an event has helped P.I.G.S. secure bookings at venues without kitchens. "We've catered events out in the middle of a field," says Lisa. "There are a lot of venues up here that are on older historic farms, where you don't have a commercial kitchen."

"When we started P.I.G.S., a lot of venues were opening in this area," adds Roddy. "Frederick County is becoming a hot place to get married—we're an hour from Baltimore and an hour from D.C. We get clients from Pennsylvania, West Virginia and

even New York. It was just a great time to get in with these venues."

Indeed, P.I.G.S.' preferred-vendor status at eight wedding venues has been a boon for business, with most of its bookings a result of vendor or word-of-mouth referral. The company also happened to catch the wave of several event trends that have contributed to its success—farm-to-table cuisine, events in rustic, natural settings, and—most of all—a growing taste for barbecue. "I think barbecue is definitely one of the hottest foods right now, not just here but all over the world," says Roddy. "People are going back to the roots of cooking; you see it even with the most famous chefs cooking familiar foods, trending

toward simpler and more comforting. Barbecue is definitely comfort food and the food of America."

The O'Connells sold their shares in the Italian restaurant in 2013 to focus full-time on P.I.G.S., but in November they jumped back into the business, launching P.I.G.S. BBQ Restaurant. With the catering business having doubled each year they've been in business, the restaurant serves a few purposes—it handles smaller events that P.I.G.S. BBQ Catering can't do, it keeps the catering staff employed year-round, it allows potential catering customers to try out the food before a full tasting session, and it helps the O'Connells keep in touch with customers.

"We've had clients that we catered their wedding, we catered their baby shower, and even a first birthday party," says Lisa. "Now they can pop in and see us any time, which is really great."



Clockwise from bottom left: Among the many selections on the P.I.G.S. menu are chicken and waffles; brisket; an array of hors d'oeuvres and sides; pimento grilled cheese with heirloom tomato shooter; and fried green tomatoes.



Opposite page: Southland BBQ Catering's Biscuit Bar, featuring sweet potato and cheddar biscuits with sweet and savory accompaniments (top), and guests at a Southland event. This page, clockwise from left: The Southland grill in action; a chef carving meat at an event; a Southland catering station; a dessert station featuring Southland's catering menus; and Nashville Chicken Sliders, the favorite of Adam Jones, culinary director.



SOUTHLAND BBQ CATERING

RALEIGH, N.C. ●●● southlandbbqcatering.com



When barbecue and Southern fare started taking off at one of Rocky Top Hospitality's restaurants in Raleigh, N.C., the company decided to go whole hog and create a catering division solely devoted to the cuisine. Launched in 2015, Southland BBQ Catering serves as an alternative to the company's traditional catering company, 13-year-old Rocky Top Catering, which caters approximately 1,200 events a year, specializes in both weddings and corporate functions, and is the exclusive caterer for such venues as the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences.

Southland BBQ Catering "cuts across the lines of barbecue distinction," as its website explains, offering a full variety of North Carolina and other regional cuisines, including in-house smoked North Carolina pulled pork barbecue, Texas-style beef brisket and St. Louis-style spare ribs. It also serves up both Eastern and Western North Carolina barbecue sauces.

"Eastern North Carolina is a vinegar-based sauce with subtle sweetness and a spicy tang," says Adam Jones, culinary director for Southland BBQ Catering. "Western North Carolina-style is more ketchup-based, with more sweetness and less acidity. The majority of our clients and their guests prefer the Eastern style, based on our geographic location, but the Western, as well as our Texas-style brisket, are still very popular." Customers can choose from barbecue buffets, with such meat selections as

beer-can BBQ chicken or smoked baby-back ribs; entrée buffets, with such selections as Jambalaya "Our Way" or BBQ bacon-wrapped shrimp and grits; or full-service packages, such as the Low Country Cookout (Old Bay shrimp, crab, mussels, sausage, corn on the cob and two sides) and the Southland Cookout (all-beef hot dogs, freshly ground burgers, pulled pork shoulder, local cheese, fresh veggies and three sides). Top-selling accompaniments include pimento mac and cheese, and collard greens.

Southland BBQ's menu is well-rounded, lending itself to a wide variety of functions, notes Jones, from corporate lunches to weddings to family reunions. "We pride ourselves on being flexible with our presentation as well as service style," he says. "If you want a good Southern pig-pickin', we can do that. If you want passed hors d'oeuvres, carving stations and the like, we can do that, too."

In fact, while 60 percent of Southland's business is corporate drop-off, "the larger,

full-service evening affairs and weddings are beginning to catch on to what we are doing," says Jones. "Where we are, barbecue is king. But it has always been that outdoor, red-checked tablecloth, paper-plate kind of thing. We are seeing brides and their families looking for a more refined approach to barbecue, and that is what we are trying to provide. Everyone around here eats barbecue, but never before has it been viewed as a formal meal. We are slowly changing people's minds about that."

To initially get the word out about the business, Rocky Top held a launch event for Southland BBQ, in which it partnered with vendors, bloggers and others in the industry. Now its marketing consists mostly of word-of-mouth advertising and branding with its drop-off business. "Our best form of marketing comes from our team simply spreading the word and people tasting our food," says Jones. While the company was booking about three or four events per month last fall, "now we are doing two to three a week," he says. "So I'd say growth is beginning to happen." ●

