

Success on a Spit

In the competitive world of rib joints, the secret to sales is in more than just the sauce

by Anita Webster

Good barbecue is personal. Aficionados debate its definition from Texas to Florida. But what makes a barbecue business a success is a bit easier to define.

While more than a dozen Gainesville-area vendors, from mom-and-pops to national chains, make barbecue their business, the ones that have set the standard seem to rely on personality, customer service and community interaction to create a following.

Here's how some local leaders smoke out the competition.

"If you find a good thing, stick with it."

How does Sonny's Real Pit Bar-B-Q maintain its claim as a "hometown" barbecue business when it's grown into a 137-store franchise?

"Sonny doesn't forget where he came from," says Michael Richard, manager of the Alachua location. "He still thinks of his restaurants as mom-and-pop establishments."

Floyd "Sonny" Tillman and his wife, Lucille, founded the original restaurant in Gainesville in 1968. Forty years later, Sonny's is the largest barbecue chain in America.

Tillman sold the company in 1991 but retains ownership of the Alachua restaurant with his son Robert.

Tillman lives "right down the road" from the restaurant and promotes his store with a grassroots approach.



Terrell's Bar-B-Que operates out of a trailer parked on NE 16th Avenue, and the familiar smell of the ribs draws in drive-by customers looking for a meal on the go.

"Sonny is a big sports fan," Richard says. His billboards hang in the local high school stadium and on ball fields, and to maintain the mom-and-pop feel of his restaurant, Tillman himself is on the radio "every Friday night" promoting his store in Alachua, Richard says. During Gator games, Sonny's corporate runs radio and television ads.

Other advertising they can't live without: "Being so close to the Interstate, we'd hate to get rid of those billboards. We've got a good local base, but anytime people are traveling, that's when you need to be seen."

Besides location, Richard says success depends on friendly employees. "From the greeter to the waitress to the cashier," Richard says, "we want to present the impression that we know what we're doing and we like what we're doing."

"We're big on longevity and loyalty."

Adam Brewer and his wife Michelle, owners of Adam's Rib Co. in Gainesville, say they don't fixate on the competition.

"We spend a lot of our energy on knowing what the customers want."

Adam says he and Michelle know most of their customers by name. "We're building a clientele that expects me to be here eight years down the road, and I want to keep up my end of the bargain."

In marketing his business, Adam's aims for "down-home Southern charm. My wife and I love the feel. Much of my family is country. We even talk with a country twang sometimes," Adam says with a chuckle.

While he advertises his business heavily in print and on TV, Adam says community investment is one of the best ways to promote the restaurant. Adam's supports churches, varsity football programs, cancer foundations and safety patrols, contributing food at cost or giving in-kind donations.

"Word-of-mouth is our best resource," Adam says. "People will say, 'These guys are doing something for us; let's do something for them.'"

"The nice thing is that it sells itself."

Mike Hill, owner of Hill's Bar B Que and Catering in Gainesville, only caters, and has developed his business through word-of-mouth.

"Cooking on site sets us apart. We take our kitchen to the customer," says Hill. "It adds to the atmosphere. [The food] is cooked there; you can smell it; you can see it; and you know you're getting fresh barbecue. It's direct advertisement."

When Hill started 21 years ago, he used community involvement to jump-start his business. By cooking for charities, he introduced new people to his food, Hill says.

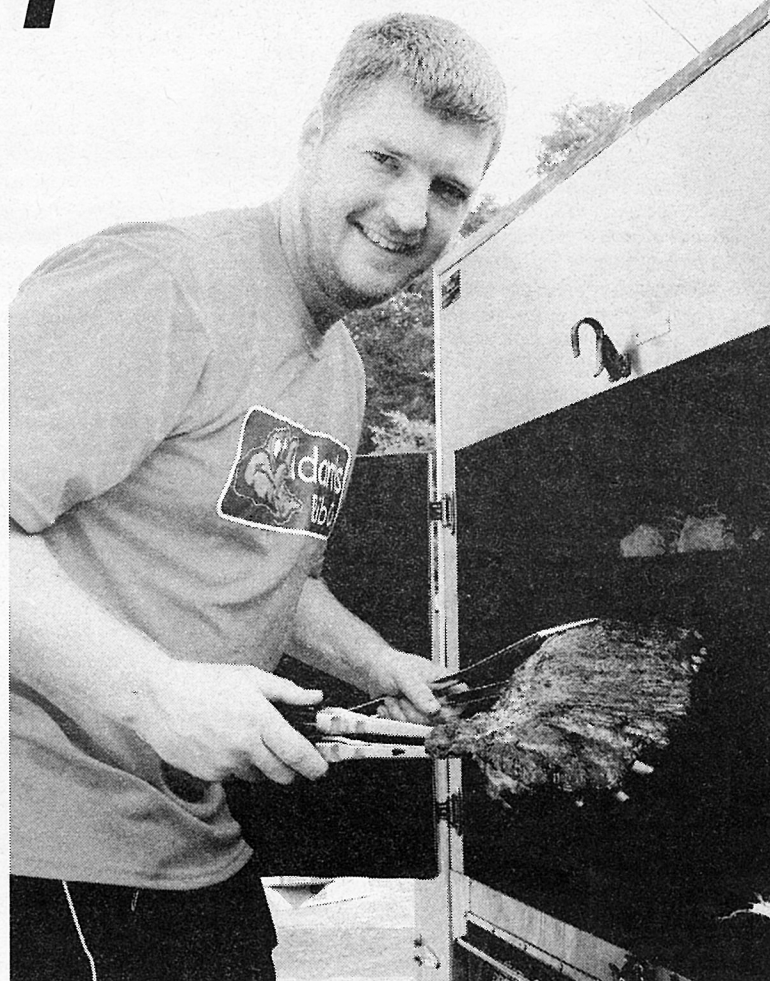
Hill continues to support more than a dozen local charities, schools and non-profits, often supplying food at cost for events, allowing each organization to keep the profits.

Variety of product also has helped Hill differentiate his business from the competition.

"We're not just barbecue. We do a little bit of everything," Hill says. "We can grill the steaks, the prime rib, fry the shrimp—whatever [the customers] want."

His barbecue styles are as varied as his menu. Unlike some barbecue business owners, whose identity is based on a singular style of barbecue, Hill has taught himself how to cook a range of styles and meats: brisket, pulled pork, whole hog, and sauces that are tomato-, mustard- or vinegar-based.

But before he'll introduce a new style, Hill studies under people who are from the region where the new recipe originated to assure the taste is authentic.



Adam Brewer of Adam's Rib Co. shows off a rack of ribs straight from the cooker. While he advertises extensively, he says community involvement also is a key ingredient in his business' success.

"Give back to the people surrounding your business"

Many barbecue businesses are named after a person, but Rocky Voglio, owner of Newberry's Backyard Bar BQ, named his store after the community.

"I wanted to build up the community," he says, "so that the [restaurant's] name comes to be associated with the local customer base."

Rocky sees a community-customer connection as essential to a small business. For that reason, he's very supportive of community groups—so much so that the state's Florida Main Street program honored him with two awards this year—one for Main Street Supporter; the other for Business of the Year.

"If any mom-and-pop business gives back to the people surrounding their business, that's the biggest advertisement they can have," he says.

Voglio's most lavish community investments are street parties.

"I opened my business 11 years ago in May, so every year we throw a Block Party for the community to celebrate our anniversary. The city lets us close down the street and we give away food; we have music and rides for the kids."

Other free events include fireworks around Labor Day and artificial snow at Christmas.

Success also depends on your ability to network with other local businesses, Voglio says. "We all help each other. If I go to another restaurant, the owners will see my name on my shirt and say, 'Hey, he's coming to our business; we'll go to his.'"

When the smoke clears, these local barbecue leaders agree that the recipe for success is not just personality, service or community investment. It's consistency as well.

"If a customer came in 10 years ago and ordered a pork sandwich and then came in today," Voglio says, "he would expect it to be the same: the quality, the service, the brand. That's why [the customers] keep coming back." **TBR**