

by Laurie Rudd

COMPETITION+ CLASSES = WINNING CHANNEL

EXPOSING CUSTOMERS TO COMPETITIVE GRILLING BUG
ADDS TO SALES OF GRILLS, COOKERS, RUBS, SAUCES AND MORE.



Dizzy Pig's award winning competition team offers competition classes on the Big Green Egg two times each year.

FROM THE SUPER BOWL TO THE OSCARS, GRAMMYS

and March Madness, a rich season of contests is upon us with the spirit of competition and the appeal of the big win.

Not without a competitive side, today's outdoor industry, and specifically the barbecue segment, also is providing winning opportunities through the marketing of their secrets for success, grill-style.

Each year, with local, regional and nationally sanctioned contests in barbecue grilling, the platform of competition has grown to become an industry within itself. The popularity

of competition is driving more specialty barbecue retailers to not only expand grill and cooker lines or develop award winning rubs and seasoning lines, but also to increase busi-

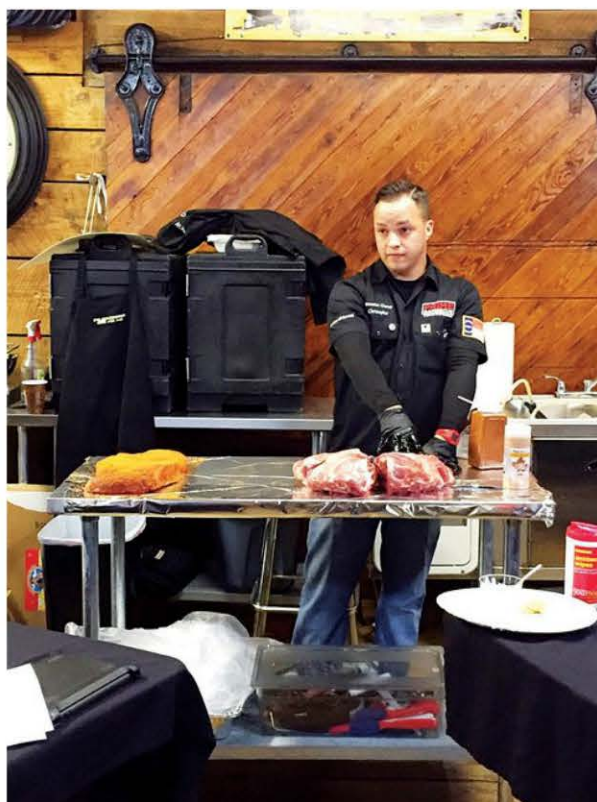
ness through the marketing of cooking classes on the competition level.

THE WINNING CLASS

Specialty retailers have always realized the value in instructing consumers on how to get the most from a newly purchased grill. But, for the competitive griller or Pitmaster, education on competition grilling techniques has been

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limited in availability. This void is being filled today by savvy barbecue dealers.

“Since Dizzy Pig started competing in 2002, we’ve seen amazing growth in both number of contests and the number of teams at each contest,” said Chris Capell, owner/flavorist, Dizzy Pig Barbecue Company, Manassas, Va. “Not only is it harder to win with more teams, but the quality of the teams has also gotten better. The larger competitive barbecue gets, the harder it is to win. The harder it is to win, the more everybody wants to know what the champions are doing.”

Capell’s team, which has captured the Kansas City Barbecue Society Grand Champion crown a total of 14 times in their category and the Reserve Grand title seven times, knows how to win. But, the formula for winning was primarily self-taught. “There

At GrillBillies BBQ, a large classroom for instruction on competition techniques is located within its historic train depot building adjacent to the retail display section of the business.



were very few classes back in 2002,” Capell said. “Now there are hundreds.”

CLASS COUNTS

In Raleigh, N.C., a barbecue specialty retailer also has capitalized on competition knowledge to create a business model that includes retail and education. “Besides offering smokers, roasters, grills and supplies, we also offer smoking and grilling classes for Pitmasters and the backyard pro,” said Joe Pino, owner, GrillBillies BBQ. “We charge a fee for all our classes, which is a significant revenue stream. The sales of the ancillary products such as seasonings, sauces, grill wear, etc., add up very quickly as a function of having a class. Also you have a lot of one-on-one time in a class environment, so it is natural to talk about the various smokers and roasters we offer, and that, in some cases, results in a sale.”

Pino was a partner in a retail

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Sales of grills and supplies is an added benefit of offering competition grilling classes for specialty grill retailers.

business in New Jersey prior to relocating to North Carolina. "Our initial focus in New Jersey was grill sales," Pino said. "As a competition team, it was a way for us to offset the costs of competing in Kansas City Barbecue Society sanctioned contests."

With the opening of the North Carolina operation of GrillBillies, Pino expanded his grill and grilling supply lines and added multiple educational opportunities. "Classes are not only beneficial for grill shops, but for any shop owner who is offering specialty foods products or accessories," Pino said. "There's a great demand out there for quality cooking information, which good classes offer."

PEOPLE WANT TO REPRODUCE WHAT WE COOK IN OUR CLASSES, AND THE MORE EXCITED THEY ARE ABOUT THE FOOD THEY EAT, THE MORE THEY BUY IN THE STORE.

CLASS SCHEDULE

Today, from its rustic country-store-like location within the historic Neuse Train Depot, GrillBillies offers classes on the competition level multiple times throughout the year with minimal marketing. "It's all about exposure and "word of mouth," Pino said. "Put on a well-structured and informative class and the news travels fast."

At the Dizzy Pig, the competition courses are biannual with

ongoing grilling classes. "Along with our popular monthly grilling classes, where we always end up dropping a few competition secrets, we do two competition classes each year," Capell said. "One in late March before the season starts here in the mid-Atlantic region and one in November after the season is pretty much wrapped up."

Revenue generated through the courses can add up for retailers who have created a draw. "The cost of Dizzcovery

classes is between \$85 and \$95 per student, with an average class size of 20 to 25 students. We have an upper threshold of roughly 50 students, before we would need to consider closing registrations," Capell said. "As for the competition classes, the cost is \$550 per student and we average about 10 to 12 students."

CLASSES ADD UP

Offering competition grilling classes not only can generate revenue from fees for specialty retailers, the add-on sales can be considerable as well. Depending on the business model of the retailer, the sales of seasonings to smokers can provide an incentive to add or maintain competition-style classes.

"People want to reproduce

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Monthly grilling classes at the Dizzy Pig also include a few competition secrets thrown in.

what we cook in our classes, and the more excited they are about the food they eat, the more they buy in the store," Capell said. "We are known to send folks home inspired and empowered, and if we do that it helps even more. Plus, they almost always come back. Most of the competition teams in the area know about us and shop here."

Pino's GrillBillies BBQ does a considerable business in seasoning and sauce sales, but also views the classes as an opportunity for major grill sales. "After a class, the students are invited to eat the food they or we have cooked so they can experience the quality of the cook and the seasonings used," Pino said. "In some occasions, the students will end up buying a smoker or a roaster due to their involvement in the class."

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With two-thirds of his total business in grill sales, the selection of grill and cooker lines carried is an important component. At GrillBillies BBQ, they carry Meadow Creek Barbecue Equipment, Primo Komodo Style Cookers and Broil King Gas Grills. The retailer is currently also looking to add a pellet cooker line. The true competitive griller can make a considerable investment in equipment.

"The Meadow Creek line can retail from \$725 up to \$46,000

for a customized trailer with multiple cookers," Pino said.

Currently carried at the Dizzy Pig is the full lineup of Big Green Egg, with which the staff has more than 50 years of combined cooking experience. "We are building a larger location and are looking at other quality cookers to complement our ceramic lineup," Capell said. Capell's company also has enhanced its business due to its development of its own line of seasoning blends.

"Creating our own line of

seasoning blends is what got us on the map, and our (business) model includes continuing to grow our distribution network and build our popular brand into a household name among foodies," Capell said. "But our main goal is to help people make better food and to help them on the way to creating that 'perfect bite.' The sales of our seasonings, grills and whatever else just seems to follow naturally as long as we are sharing our passion with our customers."

With the acceleration of competition fever in the barbecue segment, creating and maintaining courses and educational opportunities for those with the competitive bug can be a winning addition to any specialty barbecue retailer's business plans. **ca**