



HOW WE BECAME TWO OF ONLY NOTES FROM A SMALL BARBECUE ISLAND SIX MASTER JUDGES IN THE UK

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2024 will be remembered for a few significant international events. The Olympics and Paralympics were a huge spectacle in Paris; North America experienced a total solar eclipse and Taylor Swift entertained millions of concertgoers and one NFL superstar.

The news that was criminally lacking from the mainstream media was that UK Judges Kevin and Claire (my wife and I) became master judges through in no small part, traveling across Europe at weekends at a frequency described by one border control officer as “suspiciously often”.

Our KCBS judging journey started towards the end of 2018 when we did our judging class. We had been around barbecue and barbecue competitions in the UK for a few years, but that was our first opportunity to get involved with KCBS. Our route to 30 has been slowed by UK contests disappearing and a certain worldwide pandemic. So, after judging eleven contests by the end of 2019, one could be forgiven for assuming that in just a couple more years we could be joining the great and the good of KCBS judging, including only four other UK Master Judges. However, after charging headlong into those first eleven contests, by the end of March 2020 we were in the first UK lockdown period of COVID.

Confined to the house, we entertained ourselves by discussing what percentage possibility we thought our Los Angeles to Denver road trip was going to happen later in the year. At that point, I confidently predicted: “95% gonna’ happen”.

There was no way that this COVID thing was still going to be an issue in a few months. Fast forward those few months and we were firing off emails to cancel flights, hotels and hire cars. Needless to say, 2020 amongst many other things, was not a good year for KCBS contests. Marooned on eleven contests for well over twelve months things started to look up in 2021, contests were tentatively confirmed and surely by the time we got to the spring and summer, it would all be absolutely fine. Right?

As the contests were first announced and then canceled due to changing national and local rules about events and people gathering in groups, we were facing the prospect of another year devoid of anything other than home-cooked barbecue.

Then a light at the end of a dark, contest-less COVID tunnel. John Gower, an important person in the story of British barbecue, managed to organise his UK-based KCBS competition “Smoke on the Waters” on his Devon farm luckily at a time later in the year

when rules didn't prohibit it. Twenty-two months after our 11th contest we managed to get our 12th signed off. This must have been the moment that we could pick up our pace and make up for lost time, no?



It would be a further twelve months and thirteen days until our next contest; a trip to Belgium and the beautiful neogothic town of Sint Niklaas and its huge market square surrounded by bars and restaurants.

The contest which takes place on that market square in front of the 19th century town hall is a favourite for teams and judges across Europe and was organised by recently retired BBQ Team Laurentius. Including that contest, we managed in 2022 to complete a full 200% increase on the one contest we judged the previous year. That included judging back at Smoke on the Waters in its second year back after COVID, and completely by chance, managing to time a vacation to Florida just right to coincide with Plant City Pig Jam.

Sadly, Smoke on the Waters 2022 would be the last KCBS contest on John's farm, although we didn't know it at the time. It will however also be memorable to us for another reason, my wife and I did our team cook.

Barry and Lana Kreiser are BK BBQ from Edmonton, Canada. Not only that, they are just all-around brilliant people who we met in 2019 at the Sint Niklaas contest.

There are rumors that they were with us and several others in a back-street bar drinking very strong Belgian beer when they should have been tending their smokers and trimming their brisket. I can neither confirm nor deny this. Since then we have been fast friends and when they came back to Europe and the UK to compete and asked us to cook with them, there was no way we were saying no.



With the contest being a double, we cooked on Saturday and volunteered on Sunday (just in case we recognised any of those flavour profiles). Cooking with them was a joy, they were patient, got us involved, and took the time to really help us understand their process. They needed a decent result in Brisket to guarantee to be the best Canadian brisket team in 2022.



They got the walk they needed but I am still waiting for my lifetime supply of Tim Hortons timbits that I assume I am owed for being pivotal in helping them achieve it.

It was with a sense of relief that 2023 returned broadly to normal. Two double contests in Belgium and a double and a single in the Netherlands took us to twenty-three contests. There was one KCBS contest in the UK in 2023 and of course, we attended. Unfortunately (or fortunately) we didn't quite have the time to judge or volunteer because we were the organisers.

After worrying that there would be no UK KCBS contests that year and hoping somebody would do something about it, we decided that maybe that should be us. Having set up and run CompBBQUK in 2019, an organisation dedicated to promoting and supporting the growth of competition barbecue in the UK, we decided to take the plunge and become competition organisers.



So, at a huge music festival just outside Bristol called Valley Fest, we organised our first-ever barbecue competition which included our first sanctioned KCBS contest. With biblical rain and a burst water main at the top of the hill (we were at the bottom), the first of our contests, Fire in The Valley, was nearly extinguished.

Due in no small part to the hardness of British teams and judges, we got through two days of muddy, wet, and exhausting competition which included judging in a tent with two inches of flowing water running through it.

Starting 2024 with twenty-three contests in the books and a couple of European contests we would normally go to being canceled, we weren't sure if we would be able to get to enough events. We needed to hit the road, get the passport stamped, and try to remember as much high school French as possible.

My French is at best comedically unintelligible, and apart from going through French border controls, and ordering a Starbucks while waiting for the return train in Calais, is also broadly redundant. Firstly, because most contests are in Belgium or the Netherlands where they speak Dutch, and because they are just better people than us, they all also speak excellent English.

We started the year looking at what contests were already confirmed and what we thought soon would be. We did the maths (not math) and all seemed peachy. It would be tight, but with a couple of them being doubles, we could get the seven we needed. We used to have five or six KCBS contests in the UK, but people moved on and COVID had a big impact, so for the last two years, it has been just us as CompBBQUK organising one. That's not to say there aren't other contests, but currently, you can count the KCBS-sanctioned ones on a single finger. We primarily run our contests at other existing events to make competition barbecue more visible and gain interest. That unfortunately means we are mostly not in control of the dates. Lo and behold our second-ever KCBS contest at Cheltenham Food and Drink Festival clashed with a big contest in the Netherlands.

Not only was that frustrating as organisers for that contest and us, but it also meant that we couldn't go to that contest for a masters chasing pressure-reducing signature. So, some re-planning of the year took place, some sums were done to make sure we could still get to thirty.

The sprint down the final straight towards the masters' finish line started on a windy and cold asparagus farm just on the Dutch side of the Belgium and Netherlands border in April. Spitsbroek On Fire organised by the FiveQ barbecue team was the contest, but it felt more like Spitsbroek under ice. That region is a vast billiard table-like expanse of farmland and is flatter than a Dutch pancake, the wind gusts and rain falls' uninhibited directly from the Arctic by the feeling of it.



That becomes insignificant, however, because the one thing about European KCBS that we love above all else, is the people. We meet up all over Europe to cook and judge barbecue. As well as us British people journeying contest to contest. Dutch, Belgian, Austrian, German, Italian, Estonian, Lithuanian, and a smattering of American expats to name an incomplete list, mix and match at the different contests.

After a break for the winter, it was amazing to get to spend time with these people once again huddled against a farm building for a modicum of shelter from the biting wind.

After that chilly start to the year it was four weeks until the next contest, back to The Netherlands for De Vliegende Hollander, or to translate, The Flying Dutchman organised by the team of the same name. We generally drive to the majority of contests in mainland Europe. It's a three-and-a-half-hour journey from our hometown down to the south coast of England to load the car onto a car transporter train (Le Shuttle) for the 35 minute journey underneath the English Channel.



Then we disembark from the train, car, and all to the roads of France. It is then about 45 minutes to get to the closest Belgian border and then an hour or so across a very slim part of northern Belgium to The Netherlands. Unlike the UK, the majority of countries in mainland Europe are in what is called the Schengen Area which means once you are through border controls in one country, France for instance, you can move freely between them all uninhibited. In fact, in most instances, the only indication that the road crosses a border is the "welcome to" sign that zips past. Once we emerge from the train in Calais, France, it's non-stop (bladder dependent) across three countries to The Netherlands.

After De Vliegende Hollander, we again had four weeks until the next. A busy four weeks though. There were two things to get done in that time, the small issue of our first (non-KCBS) CompBBQUK contest of the year at our good friend and amazing rub and sauce maker Tubby Toms for the first ever Tubby Fest. Then a ten-day vacation in Florida sadly devoid of any local contests.

Our car took a well-earned rest from traversing northern Europe in the airport parking lot while we jetted off for our third contest visit of 2024. We undertook our longest journey of the year and flew to Lithuania for Twin Smoke. Organised by European barbecue legends BBQ Mates at a music festival organised by barbecue manufacturer and team, Kamado BONO.



This was our first time at this contest, and we can't wait to go back. Held just outside the capital Vilnius, the festival and contest are in the grounds of a spa hotel, so created a beautiful community of judges, teams and other interested parties in and around the hotel. An extended weekend was only enhanced by a visit to Vilnius Old Town on the final night of the trip with our ever-present barbecue best friends, KCBS Reps for the weekend and all-around wonderful people, Mark and Ange Fishlock.

Just two weeks later we were back in the car, gassed up with cruise control set to "hot and fast" across France and in to Belgium. Boom is a small Belgian town just south of Antwerp, not only is it home to our first double contest of the year in the form of Belgisch BBQ Weekend organised by The Antwerp Smokers barbecue team.

The contest's public park location is also home to one of the biggest electronic music festivals in Europe, due to be staged only a few weeks later which made for an interesting spectacle seeing the huge main stage mid-construction behind the contest area.



For this weekend we had brought our twenty-year-old niece Niamh along for the ride. She even got involved as a volunteer in the judging room and was seen several times indulging in the best perk of all at contests, free meat.

Phase one of the 2024 operation master judge was complete. Five contests across four trips were done, but now it was the best part of three months until our next judging assignment. At least that gave us time to focus on our own KCBS contest, and the second CompBBQUK organised contest of the year. Our KCBS contest for the last two years has been the only one in the UK. This year it was taking place as part of the Cheltenham Food and Drink Festival. Cheltenham is a beautiful regency town, basically, it looks a lot like Bridgeton but with more Teslas parked on the street. So, to have our contest in the manicured park at its centre was very special.

The weather at outdoor events is always a concern in the UK, but unlike our previous KCBS contest, it was sunny, hot and dry. The Cotswolds Barbecue Championships was a success and we were blessed by the barbecue gods with judging visits to our very small contest by KCBS judging legends and friends of ours Dan and Annette Hayden from Tennessee, KCBS Reps Scott and Debbie Spray from Texas, our good friends from The Netherlands Emile and Saskia Van Der Gender, Australian judge Monica Parvin, and many of our UK based judges who

because the UK KCBS scene is small, we are lucky enough to call them all friends.



So after our mid-season break from travelling, it was time to try to remember where we had last seen both our passports and our KCBS badges. After finally discovering both of them in a draw neither had any business being in, we loaded up the car to travel to the all-important 29th and 30th contest. Back under the English Channel on the car train, we journeyed to De Vaartse Hoeve in The Netherlands, a double contest roughly halfway between Rotterdam and Antwerp.

After struggling to find reasonably priced hotels near the contest I found a quaint little hotel in the centre of a beautiful quiet town called Breda about 20 minutes from the contest site. Google Street View confirmed the hotel was conveniently located right in the town centre surrounded by bars, cafes and restaurants with their European street seating in the shadow of the ancient cathedral.

One could only imagine the peaceful evenings we would have after the contests, strolling through the market square, stopping to drink espresso, and eating in picturesque Dutch bistros. Street View photos are generally taken during the day, so imagine our surprise when the evening and night rolled in and Breda town centre turned

into the Dutch Daytona Beach at spring break. That is of course a slight exaggeration and we embraced and enjoyed staying in Breda with its tree-lined square, many cafes and bars, even if we were tucked up in bed before most of the young people let their hair down. It was certainly more thriving nightlife venue than gentle relaxation though, reinforced by our realisation that the hotel did not have soundproof windows.

With the contest being a double, we made it a long weekend traveling there on the Friday and back on the Monday. The reps for the contest were Mark and Ange, so it made it extra special that they would be the reps for our all-important contest.

On the second day and our 30th contest, Claire and myself read the oath. Claire lost confidence in the pronunciation of the Dutch contest name, "De Vaartse Hoeve" in the middle and let me take the lead in embarrassing myself by taking a solo shot at it. Pumping my fist in the air with joy at getting the name roughly 35% correct, I almost forgot that there was still half of the oath to go.

After finally reaching thirty contests, I could have celebrated by giving every single entry 9,9,9 and a comment card for each that just said, "Thanks for being part of my 30th contest". But I like to think I am a fair and thoughtful judge, so opted for the tried and tested age-old method that has served me well through all thirty, and judged each entry on its own merits.



So that was it, thirty contests done. After returning home to the UK, Claire did her exam first and passed first time. Now I'm not saying that her questions were easier than mine, or there was some kind of glitch in the system that marked some of my answers as incorrect when in fact they were correct, but she scored higher than me, but I still passed with my slightly lower score.

Just to celebrate, two weeks later we were back on the road and in The Netherlands for Vuur en Vlees with Mark and Ange who were taking a break from Rep duties and judging. Also in attendance were many of our European friends including Emiel and Saskia and stalwart Dutch KCBS Reps Marianne and Mayco.

The contest took place at a beautiful equine centre where a huge international show jumping event was taking place to keep everyone entertained. So between registration, meetings, and judging, we could watch horses and riders from Brazil, Saudi Arabia and Dubai among other countries competing over Saturday and Sunday. In a plan that Claire described as "not properly thought through", we finished judging and at 2 pm, said our goodbyes for the year and set out on the 385-mile journey through four countries all the way home to Nuneaton in the UK.

Eight hours and forty-five minutes later, but with a one hour in our benefit time zone change, we pulled onto our driveway at 9:45 pm and our contest season was over. I love barbecue and will talk about it for hours, that's why I'm so much fun at parties. Claire appreciates it, supports it, and tolerates my obsession.

What we both love, however; is the people we know through it and the people we meet along the way. So, it would only be right to finish this story with them as the crowning glory of our journey to our masters.

All the teams we see all over Europe including the UK's very own Ed and Emma of Bunch of Swines who we see at the majority of contests we are at, including supporting our own. A super successful team across many years in the UK, Europe and The States. The judges travel far and wide from across Europe including the other four master judges along with Mark and Ange, Roger Sanderson, and Andy Williams. A special shout out to previously mentioned Dan and Annette who we have known for several years through KCBS from Tennessee, who traveled to several European contests including ours in the UK.

Kent and Jodi Harriss, recently qualified as Reps in Florida and while we didn't get to see them this year, they have been a really important part of our journey and have become great friends. Emiel and Saskia also pop up wherever we are and just make us laugh. All the UK judges who are always supportive of our endeavors as CompBBQUK. And finally, Mark and Ange specifically, UK KCBS Reps extraordinaire, perpetual visitors to The Jack and truly our best barbecue friends, have been at every single contest we have organised and attended this year either judging or as reps, always going far over and above as both reps and helpers at our contests.

So here we are with a total of thirty-one contests judged, a little time to reflect on our plans for next year both with CompBBQUK and judging, and a year's worth of memories to add to the filing cabinet in our heads marked "fun barbecue times". If you are interested in UK competition barbecue or competing in the UK. You can get in touch through our website www.compbbquk.com.

