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“What’s the deal with garnish?”

The 2009 KCBS rules, available in PDF format on the internet, also available from your contest Reps and organizers, are very clear on this point, “garnish is optional”. They are also very clear when it comes to what products are permitted to be used as garnish. Green lettuce, curly parsley, flat leaf parsley, and or cilantro are considered acceptable to be used as garnish for your turn-in boxes. Kale, endive, red tipped lettuce, lettuce cores, and other vegetation are prohibited. Boxes containing an improper or illegal garnish will receive a score of 1 on appearance. A score of 1 for any of the three scoring criteria is not very helpful towards your overall contest outcome.

In other words, read the rules, stay within the stated parameters, and you will be fine. Staying within the rules to avoid a score of 1 on appearance seems to be where any agreement on garnish amongst BBQ contest cooks ends. Get 5 BBQ teams together in a group and I’ll bet you’ll have 6 descriptions of what to do about garnish.(one team will always have at least 2 opinions)

First, you have the no garnish, garnish should be outlawed, “this ain’t a salad contest” group. Always quick to speak out about the use of garnish while accentuating any and all negatives, I always wonder if they themselves are submitting boxes without garnish, meat only. Hmmmm...I wonder.

The “putting green” box seems to have become popular of late. This is accomplished by placing sprigs of parsley tightly into the bottom of a box so as to resemble a golf green. I have heard of some teams taking hours and hours to construct four parsley boxes for a contest. My own personal opinion, nicely cooked BBQ products look mighty appetizing sitting on a level, smooth, bed of properly laid parsley.

Next you have the lettuce heads. These contestants use green lettuce and can do a fine job of prepping their boxes to accentuate their turn-in submission. This seems to be where most teams begin, as some would say it the easiest to prepare. I do not think I will call a box properly prepped with lettuce ‘easy’ to make, but compared to a parsley box, lets just call it easier.

Last but not least are the combo teams. These teams use both a mixture of legal products in the same box as well as a combination of different type boxes at any given contest. Maybe their chicken on parsley, ribs in a lettuce box with a touch of cilantro added, ribs, all lettuce, well, you get the picture. The choice is yours.

My advice to a team new to the circuit would be to research, observe and practice. Start off by searching the net for photographs of other teams’ turn-in boxes. Many teams post

pictures of their boxes on their web sites. A search of the archives of the many BBQ forums will also yield many examples of other teams turn-in efforts. Take a look and read the associated comments, there is a ton of good information floating around out there in hyper-space. Go to a local contest and watch the teams during the turn-in window. Some teams choose to operate in secret for obvious reasons, but many teams prepare their boxes in the wide open and will even offer those standing around a look-see before the lid is closed. Pick up a couple of Styrofoam containers at a local carryout shop, take them home and practice. Take what you have learned and build a few boxes on your own. Remember, garnish is optional, you decide.