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### **BBQ Gremlins; fact or fiction**

BBQ gremlins, do they exist? Many have pondered this age-old question ever since the Caveman first put fire to meat. The debate has raged for years, rivaling the argument about Big Foot or the Loch Ness Monster. While I can not say that I have ever personally observed these pesky creatures, I have observed the signs left behind when they decide to pay you a visit. I can not say for sure, but if you ever get a chance to capture or possibly photograph one of these little buggers, you would be set for life. I will caution you however, that there are several alleged gremlin photos circulating around the internet and in the supermarket tabloids, most have found to be fake.

Use caution if you see one, my advice would be to observe from a distance, take a photograph, then grab him by the throat and throttle the life out of him. (I realize that this sounds a bit harsh, but if they ever pay you a visit, you will know what I mean) You can then stick the remains in a bottle of formaldehyde and go on the carnival/daytime talk show circuit; you'll never have to work again, particularly after you appear on the Oprah Show.

The Salisbury Pork in the Park contest was scheduled for April 18 and 19<sup>th</sup> 2008. The weatherman promised good weather and then he delivered. Two days of sunny mild weather was just great for mid April in the Del Mar Va area. Contest organizer Sandy Fulton told me early on that she had a weather connection and I believe her. The first two years of this contest had rain for both days. It seems after a rocky start; Sandy has managed wonderful weather for this contest, I think she does have a weather guy! What gremlins?

Our team was really looking forward to our season opener and a chance to get everyone together again. The contest at Salisbury has really grown, in 2008 there were 83 teams. Some of the big names in BBQ were there which prompted many on the BBQ bulletin boards to say they would have to bring their A game, which I pretty much think they would have brought anyway. Did I hear a giggling gremlin?

Note to self: when cooking in a contest of many teams, do not wait until arriving in the town where the contest is to be held before buying your garnish. We stopped at a Food Lion as soon as we hit Salisbury. The green leaf lettuce had already been picked over, what was left was not very attractive. The produce manager said he would get another shipment in around noon on Saturday, that wouldn't do us much good unless we wanted to make a salad to eat on the way home. Not to worry, we bought four crappy looking bunches, (just in case), and we would run out later and grab a few, better looking heads. We did run out, we went to several stores and could not find a bunch of green leaf lettuce or parsley within 25 miles of the contest site, valuable lesson learned. The BBQ gremlins were just warming up.

We got set up without a hitch, met our neighbors, had a few beers and got the two Friday night categories turned in without too much difficulty. Later on our big meats went into our preheated Tall Boy Caldera right on schedule. A couple of fine cigars and all was well in our little corner of the world. We even had time for a little visiting. A nearly full moon along with warm temps made for a very delightful night. Who is afraid of a few gremlins?

Saturday morning at 5:30 AM, my alarm sounded. It was sometime around 6:00 when I drug my large behind out of the rack to get the ribs into the smoke. While I was at it, I would check temperature on the big meats which had been cooking all night. To sum it up, they were not where they should have been, they were behind, way behind. This set the tone for the entire day. I tried everything I could but the large cuts were just standing still, the only thing getting done was a flat and a butt I had in the WSM, if all else failed, we would have something to turn in. As meats were wrapped and finished, I would move others around between cookers. It was a game of musical chairs and the clock was ticking toward chicken time. I think the gremlins had stayed up working while we rested, or so it seemed.

Did I mention the grease fire? Sometime after breakfast, as I was steadily jacking the temp up in the Tall Boy, the Guru alarm sounded for a heat spike. I opened the door and found a grease fire in the lower section of the unit. Nothing like the smell of burning grease emitting from a cooker filled with unwrapped meat that was to be used for a contest entry. That ought to give us a good flavor profile! We extinguished the fire, cooled the cooker and moved on, what else could we do? It was nearing 10:00 AM. The gremlins were laughing their gremlin butts off now.

I was behind on starting my chicken prep and rushing was not fun. I got everything ready and into the cooker for the first leg of the cook which by all previous time studies would take about 1.5 hours. The chicken came to temp in 1 hour, how could that happen? Those dam Gremlins. There is nothing like holding chicken for 30-40 minutes while all of the juice slowly leaves the meat right before your eyes, oh what a feeling! What's that over there under the table?

The pork eventually came off at temp and feeling done. The ribs were pretty much on schedule, but a slight miscalculation in time caused them to be a tad over cooked, but not too bad. The brisket was another story. We eventually got it to temperature, but it sure didn't "feel" done. We pulled and tossed everything into the cooler to rest and await turn in time. The gremlins had to be holding their sides by this time.

I think I can offer a brief summary of our entries. Chicken, rubbery skin, moist inside, tender meat. A beautiful testament to my winters trials and tribulations, can we say time well spent, I think not, gremlins again. Ribs, a little over cooked, not very pleasing to the eye, flavorful and tender, a bit dry. Pork, one butt felt very good, the other butt was like pot roast, overall, I thought it was our best pork submission yet. The brisket, we cooked two packers and a flat. The first flat from a packer I cut into for a taste test actually looked like it emitted a cloud of dust. Did somebody say dry? A repeat occurred on the

next flat. This left the flat we had cooked solo. At least the knife would cut it, but I don't think I would go so far as to use the word tender or moist. That had to be gremlins I heard earlier, somebody get a net.

We got everything into the boxes, and by the way, our Lettuce man Erich did a yeoman's job making good looking boxes from some nasty looking lettuce. We were behind in time during the entire turn-in procedure. The ribs, I wanted to take out and rebuild the entire box, but we were down to two minutes to go, we had to close the lid and send them in. Caution: gremlins at work.

As I was slicing the remaining brisket into pieces for the team to take home, I had to stop several times as I was overheating the electric knife. Man, that's what I call a tender brisket, who wants some? Needless to say, I brought home a ton of brisket meat that week, oh well, it does make good chili. Maybe I'll feed it to the gremlins!

We packed up the gear and shuffled over for the awards. This was our fifth contest and I honestly sat down and thought there is no way we are getting a call in the strong field that was there. I was almost right, we heard our name called for 4th place pork. Our first call ever for pork, in a field of 83, not too bad. Just when we thought we ran the gremlins out of town, we left the contest without taking a team picture. I guess they got the last laugh.

While no official confirmed gremlin sightings were recorded in Salisbury that weekend we feel certain they were present. The signs they leave behind were everywhere at our site. I would swear to you that I could hear them laughing at me several times, especially right after I put out the grease fire, although, the laughter could have been coming from the teams around us but I really don't think that was likely. So, the myth continues. I cannot offer any solid evidence as to their existence, it is all circumstantial, as is evident by this story. I can only hope that their visits are not frequent, and hope not to see or hear them again for the rest of the season, and if I do, I think I have a trap that will work.

We had a ball, the weather was great. We saw some old friends and made some new ones, overall, the trip was a success. The score sheets would show we finished 16th overall, a decent effort in a very strong field. Not bad despite the best efforts of the BBQ Gremlins. As to their existence, I for one am a believer!