

Published June 14, 2017

Where there's smoke there's barbecue

By Cathy Dausman



David Mazaika's barbecue rig can hold its own against shiny red firetrucks. Photos Cathy Dausman

When David Mazaika comes on the scene he is often accompanied by smoke and fire. There is plenty of shiny red and chrome equipment too, but there may also be hot dogs, pork, chicken or tri-tip.

Mazaika is a Moraga-Orinda Fire District engineer, as well as a welder and cook. He combined the latter talents to hand-craft one industrial-sized barbecue smoker oven on wheels, a project Mazaika admits cost him three years in labor plus "blood, sweat, tears - and even a few beers."

He says his barbecue is still very much a work in progress. The unit doesn't have a name yet although it begs for one. From its heavy-duty four-wheeled trailer to its wood-burning fire box to the oven scratch-built from a repurposed air tank and OS&Y sprinkler valve handles to its big-rig twin chrome smoke stacks, it is a marvelous sight to behold. It is red and shiny enough to hold its own even amid commercial fire trucks.

And hold its own it does - the unit handles 100 pounds of meat at a time. "I did a whole pig for Super Bowl one year," Mazaika said. Although he brings the smoker to work for his crew and coworkers to enjoy, Mazaika says, "It is my personal barbecue and it is kept at my house."

The smoker was featured at a recent MOFD Open House in Orinda where Mazaika busily turned out barbecued hot dogs. Lunch proceeds were donated to the Muscular Dystrophy Association.

"My father taught me to weld, and I thought I could build one of these cool barbecues," Mazaika said. After some research, he decided to build a smoker. "I did not have to make the barbecue as detailed as it is for it to be functional, but I wanted to give it some character," he said. The red and chrome color scheme was almost a given considering his profession.

Mazaika also loved "the look of industrial stuff from the '30s and '40s. I wanted it to look like an old boiler that might have come out of a factory 80 years ago," he said. The trailer was a surplus gift. "It was going to be for my backyard" Mazaika said until his friend gave him the trailer. To date the barbecue on wheels has traveled as far north as Red Bluff.

Just how did Mazaika get bitten by the barbecue bug? "A few years ago a

barbecue competition show was popular on the Food Network and I enjoyed watching the teams compete with their cool homemade barbecues," Mazaika said. He perfected his cooking skills by assisting Martinez Sportsmen's Club's Danny Pellegrini. Although he says he is not a hard-core competitor Mazaika has entered the King of the County barbecue contest in Martinez a couple times.

The barbecue takes about an hour to reach 225 degrees, Mazaika's preferred cooking temperature. "There are thermometers on the cook box and I stoke the fire about every 40 minutes," he said. He even cooks for the employees at Bob's Christmas Tree Lot in Moraga.

"In December the lot gets busy, so for one day I come down and barbecue for them, so they can enjoy a hot lunch of tri-tip and ribs," Mazaika said.

When he's not cooking, Mazaika works out of Orinda's Fire Station 45. He's been with MOFD for 19 years; he spent the first five years as a reserve officer. "I am a second-generation firefighter in the department," he said. "My father, Steve Mazaika, started as one of the original Moraga Volunteers Firefighters."

Mazaika has no plans to cook for a living. "I get many offers to be hired, but I just cook for friends and family. I don't want this to become a side business (because) then it becomes more work than fun. I don't want that. I built it to have fun."

Understanding barbecue - and building them

If this article has left you bitten by the barbecue bug, first bone up on the regional definitions of slow-

smoked meat.

Cooking styles differ from city or region of origin, from Kansas City, Kansas, to Memphis, Tennessee, Lexington, Kentucky, North Carolina and Texas. Sauces, marinades, dry rubs, choice of meat and the very wood itself (pellets or logs? Cherry, apple, pecan, alder, oak, hickory or mesquite?) all impart delicious but distinctive tastes to your entrée.

Then flip over to the Kansas City Barbecue Society website (www.kcbs.us/index.php) for in-depth information on the subject. This nonprofit organization boasts over 20,000 members and sanctions more than 500 barbecue contests worldwide, including the upcoming Silicon Valley BBQ Championship at Santa Clara Central Park, June 23-24 (www.kcbs.us/event/6877/silicon-valley-bbq-championship).

For those stoked to build their own smoker out of wood, metal, cinder block, brick clay pots, or cardboard, Lamorinda Weekly has smoked out a few...ahem... choice websites to get you started:

<http://cooldiyideas.com/diy-meat-smokers/>

www.popularmechanics.com/home/food-drink/how-to/a778/3372796/

http://amazingribs.com/links/build_your_own_bbq_smoker_grill.html

www.instructables.com/id/How-to-Build-a-Smoker/

With summer just days away, if you really can't wait, ready-made units abound:

www.thespruce.com/how-to-buy-a-food-smoker-331659

- Cathy Dausman



Reach the reporter at: cathy.d@lamorindaweekly.com

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