

PWX 2026 National BBQ Showdown Rule Book

This is a rule book for the National BBQ Showdown at the American Public Works Association's (APWA) 2026 Public Works Expo (PWX) in Houston, based on the International Barbeque Cookers Association (IBCA) rules and guidelines and the Kansas City Barbecue Society (KCBS) for the categories of Brisket, Pork Ribs, Cook's Choice and Pork Shoulder. The rules are derived from information on the KCBS website (kcb.org) and IBCA website (ibcabbq.org)

Introduction

The Texas Chapter of APWA (TX-APWA) is hosting a National BBQ Showdown (herein referred to as “cook-off”) during PWX 2026 in Houston, Texas. To ensure fair and equitable competition, this cook-off will follow the rules and guidelines established by the IBCA and KCBS. The competition will include four categories: Brisket, Pork Ribs, Pork Shoulder and Cook's Choice.

This cook-off aims to promote camaraderie, showcase culinary skills, and provide a fun, competitive environment for APWA conference attendees. TX-APWA aims to promulgate fair and equitable competitive barbecue cooking through standardized rules and unbiased judging methodologies.

General Rules and Guidelines

Entry Requirements

- The entry fee is \$500.00 per team, which includes one entry in each of the four categories (Brisket, Pork Ribs, Cook's Choice and Pork Shoulder)
- Teams must register by August 21, 2026 at this link: <https://pwx2026bbqshowdown.rsvpify.com/>.
- **Each team must supply all the necessary equipment, including cookers, wood, or wood products. Cooking Team's Tents must provide sandbags or leg weights to secure their tents. Pits may be rented. If teams are using their own pellets or electric grills, then they must bring their own generator.**

If you need to rent a BBQ pit:

The Rustic Smoker BBQ & Trailer Rental
832-724-7170
Therusticsmoker@gmail.com
Adrian Estrada

Judging Process

- A double-blind ticket system will be used to ensure fair and unbiased judging. Each team will receive two tickets with matching numbers: one attached to the bottom of the judging container (hidden) and one retained by the head cook. Winning numbers will be announced at the awards ceremony, and teams must present their ticket to claim prizes.
- Entries will be judged on appearance, taste, tenderness, aroma, and color. In case of a tie, the team with the highest score in taste will win. If the tie persists, scores will be evaluated in the

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following order: appearance, tenderness, aroma, color. The higher score in Brisket for Grand Champion ties will break the tie, followed by Pork Ribs, then Pork Shoulder, then Cook's Choice.

- The APWA head judge will provide judging trays (Styrofoam containers with foil liners).
- Teams must open their boxes before turning in to mop up any excess juice with a paper towel. Any juice that seeps out after the box is closed will not be counted against the team.

Turn-In Requirements

- Each team must submit entries in the provided Styrofoam containers with foil liners. The foil does not need to line the entire bottom of the box but may be folded into a square.
- Teams must not mark or alter the turn-in boxes in any way that could identify their entry, ensuring uniformity and fairness.
- **Brisket:** Nine whole slices, approximately 1/4" to 3/8" thick (about the width of a #2 wooden school pencil).
- **Pork Ribs:** Nine individual, bone-in pork ribs.
- **Cook's Choice:** Nine individual pieces
- **Pork Shoulder:** Pulled Pork and nine slices

Cooks' Meeting

- **Attendance at the cooks' meeting is mandatory.** Teams must attend to receive specific instructions, including any adjustments to this rule book based on the event feedback, and collect their turn-in trays. **(Friday, August 28, 2026 @ 4:00PM)**
- Meat will be inspected at this Cooks meeting and must be unseasoned or prepped for the event. This includes any rubs, injections, marinade, etc. A kitchen area will be provided for prepping and trimming. However, due to limited space, pre-trimming of meat will be allowed.

Prizes and Awards

- Winners will be announced at 1:00 PM on the cook-off day.
- Grand Champion will receive belt buckles.
- First Place in each category (Brisket, Pork Ribs, Cook's Choice and Pork Shoulder) will receive a trophy.
- Second and Third Place in each category will receive trophies.

Disqualifications

- Entries violating the rules (e.g., incorrect number of portions, non-compliant meat cuts, or marking the box) will be disqualified at the discretion of the contest officials
- No garnishes, sauces, puddling in the box, or post-cooking trimming (e.g., cutting brisket edges to fit the box) are allowed.
- All meat must be prepared on site
- Automatic Disqualifications for uncooked meat
- The Cut and Preparation Permitted Cuts: Boston butt, picnic, and whole shoulder are allowed.

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- **Disqualification Criteria No Marks or Garnishes:** The box must contain only the meat. No lettuce or parsley.
- **No Foreign Objects:** Any altered bone (e.g., carved or polished) or toothpicks will result in automatic disqualification.

Cooking Guidelines

- All meats must be cooked on-site. Pre-cooked or pre-seasoned meats are not allowed.
- Teams may use sauce during cooking, but excessive sauce that puddles in the box must be mopped up before turn-in.

Category-Specific Rules

Beef Brisket

- **Quantity:** Nine whole slices, approximately 1/4" to 3/8" thick (about the width of a #2 wooden school pencil).
- **Presentation:** The slices must fill the width of the Styrofoam container. If they are too long, curl the ends around the sides of the box in a "U" shape. After cooking, the edges may not be trimmed.
 - **Preparation:** The fat cap may be removed after cooking. Burnt ends are not permitted in the turn-in box.
- **Judging Criteria:** Judges will evaluate brisket for appearance, taste, tenderness, aroma, and color. Slices should have a slight tug when pulled from both ends and not fall apart.
 - **Notes:** Ensure slices are uniform and fit the box without post-cooking trimming. Practice cutting slices to the specified thickness and test with plastic utensils to ensure tenderness.

Pork Ribs

- **Quantity:** Nine individual, bone-in pork ribs.
- **Presentation:** Ribs must be placed meat side up in the Styrofoam container. **Spare and St. Louis cut ribs are acceptable**, but baby back ribs, loin ribs, or country-style ribs are not permitted.
- **Preparation:** Ribs should be cooked to allow a clean bite, exposing the bone only where bitten, rather than sliding off the bone entirely.
- **Judging Criteria:** Judges will evaluate appearance, taste, tenderness, aroma, and color. Ribs should be easily sampled with plastic utensils.
- **Notes:** Overcook ribs slightly according to KCBS standards to ensure tenderness when sampled with plastic utensils after sitting for 15–30 minutes.

Cook's Choice

- **Quantity:** Nine individual pieces.
- **Presentation:** Meat must be placed in the Styrofoam container.
- **The Meat Rule:** You cannot submit standard competition meats. Teams often pivot to creative options like beef tenderloin, pork belly, brisket burnt ends, lamb, duck, or seafood.
- **Judging Criteria:** Judges will evaluate appearance, taste, tenderness, aroma, and color.

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- **Notes:** No Identifying Marks: Entries must be double-blind judged. Platters or turn-in boxes cannot be marked with flags, team names, or distinct sculptures that identify who cooked it. Garnishes are allowed.

Pork Shoulder

- **Quantity:** Nine individual slices and pulled pork shoulder.
- **Presentation:** Shoulder must be placed meat side up in the Styrofoam container.
- **Mixed Presentation:** You don't have to submit nine identical portions. Many pitmasters mix pulled pork, cubed pieces, and sliced "money muscle" (the cylindrical muscle located in the pork shoulder).
- **Preparation:** Shoulder should be cooked to allow a clean bite.
- **Judging Criteria:** Judges will evaluate appearance, taste, tenderness, aroma, and color.
- **Notes:** Overcook shoulder slightly according to KCBS standards to ensure tenderness when sampled with plastic utensils after sitting for 15–30 minutes. The Cut and Preparation Permitted Cuts: Boston butt, picnic, and whole shoulder are allowed.

Additional Recommendations for Teams

- **Practice Cooking:** Conduct practice cooks using Styrofoam trays and test entries with plastic utensils after letting them sit for 15–30 minutes to simulate judging conditions.
- **Flavor Profiles:** Avoid overly complex flavors. Focus on balanced, “backyard-style” barbecue to appeal to judges.

Event-Specific Notes

- **Venue:** The cook-off will occur at the APWA PWX 2026 in Houston, Texas immediately in front of the George R. Brown Convention Center.
- **Schedule:** Turn-in times for each category will be announced at the mandatory cooks’ meeting. Teams must adhere strictly to these times.
- **Health and Safety:** Teams must comply with local health codes, including proper food handling and sanitation practices.

This rule book ensures compliance with IBCA and KCBS standards while providing clear guidance for teams competing in the APWA 2026 PWX National BBQ Showdown. Refer to ibcabbq.org and kcbs.us or contact the event organizer for additional details or clarification. Good luck, and happy cooking!

Instructions for Judges

1. Double-Blind Judging: Entries are identified only by a ticket number to ensure anonymity. Do not attempt to identify teams.

2. Scoring: Evaluate each entry on a scale of 2–10 (whole numbers only) for each criterion: Appearance, Taste, Tenderness, Aroma, and Color.

-2: Poor

-4: Fair

-6: Good

-8: Very Good

-10: Excellent

3. Disqualifications: Note any rule violations (e.g., incorrect number of portions, marked boxes, garnishes, or non-compliant meat cuts) and report to the Head Judge for review.

4. Judging Process: Sample entries using provided plastic utensils after entries have rested for 15–30 minutes. Score based on the criteria below.

5. Tiebreaker: In case of a tie, the entry with the highest Taste score wins. If still tied, evaluate in this order: Appearance, Tenderness, Aroma, Color. For Grand Champion ties, prioritize Brisket, then Ribs, then Pork Shoulder.

6. Confidentiality: Do not discuss scores with other judges until all scoring is complete and submitted to the Head Judge.

Example of the Judges' Score Sheet (TBD)

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Judges' Score Sheet

Category: [] Beef Brisket [] Pork Ribs [] Cook's Choice [] Pork Shoulder

Scoring: Evaluate each entry on a scale of 2–10 (whole numbers only)

Appearance, Taste, Tenderness, Aroma, and Color

2: Poor 4: Fair 6: Good 8: Very Good 10: Excellent

Entry #				
Appearance	Taste	Tenderness	Aroma	Color
				Total:

Category-Specific Judging Guidelines

Beef Brisket

- **Quantity:** Nine slices, 1/4" to 3/8" thick, filling the width of the Styrofoam container.
- **Appearance:** Look for uniform slices, neatly arranged, with no excess juice puddling in the box.
- **Taste:** Evaluate flavor balance (salt, smoke, spices). Avoid overly complex profiles.
- **Tenderness:** Slices should have a slight tug when pulled, not fall apart, and be easily cut with plastic utensils.
- **Aroma:** Should be smoky and appetizing, without overpowering chemical or off odors.
- **Color:** Look for a consistent smoke ring and appealing caramelized exterior.
- **Disqualifications:** Incorrect number of slices, burnt ends, marked boxes, garnishes, or post-cooking trimming.

Pork Ribs

- **Quantity:** Nine individual bone-in pork ribs, meat side up.
- **Appearance:** Ribs should be uniformly arranged, with no excess sauce puddling.
- **Taste:** Evaluate for balanced smoke, spice, and pork flavor.
- **Tenderness:** When bitten, meat should pull cleanly from the bone, not slide off entirely, and be easily sampled with plastic utensils.
- **Aroma:** It should be smoky and appetizing without off-odors.
- **Color:** Look for a consistent, appealing mahogany or caramelized exterior.
- **Disqualifications:** Baby back ribs, country-style ribs, incorrect portions, marked boxes, or garnishes.

Cook's Choice

- **Quantity:** Nine individual pieces.
- **The Meat Rule:** You cannot submit standard competition meats. Teams often pivot to creative options like beef tenderloin, pork belly, brisket burnt ends, lamb, duck, or seafood.
- **Taste:** Evaluate for balanced smoke, spice, and flavor.
- **Tenderness:** When bitten, meat should melt in your mouth and be easily sampled with plastic utensils.
- **Aroma:** It should be smoky and appetizing without off-odors.
- **Color:** Look for a consistent, appealing mahogany or caramelized exterior.
- **Disqualifications:** Incorrect portions, marked boxes, or uncooked meat.

Pork Shoulder

- **Quantity:** Nine individual bone-in pork ribs, meat side up.
- **Appearance:** Ribs should be uniformly arranged, with no excess sauce puddling.
- **Taste:** Evaluate for balanced smoke, spice, and pork flavor.
- **Tenderness:** When bitten, meat should pull cleanly from the bone, not slide off entirely, and be easily sampled with plastic utensils.
- **Aroma:** It should be smoky and appetizing without off-odors.
- **Color:** Look for a consistent, appealing mahogany or caramelized exterior.
- **Disqualifications:** Baby back ribs, country-style ribs, incorrect portions, marked boxes, or garnishes.

Scoring Notes

- **Total Score:** Sum the scores for Appearance, Taste, Tenderness, Aroma, and Color (0–50 points per entry).
- **Comments/Disqualification Notes:** Use this column to note rule violations (e.g., “6 slices instead of 9”) or specific feedback (e.g., “overly saucy”). Report disqualifications to the Head Judge immediately.
- **Submission:** Submit completed score sheets to the Head Judge promptly after judging each category.

Additional Notes for Judges

- **Consistency:** Score consistently across entries to ensure fairness. Compare entries within the same category, not across categories.
- **Plastic Utensils:** Entries are judged using plastic knives and forks, so tenderness should reflect ease of cutting and biting after resting.
- **Bias Prevention:** Avoid discussing entries with other judges during scoring. Focus solely on the criteria provided.
- **Health and Safety:** Follow food safety protocols, including hand washing and proper handling of utensils.

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Head Judge Contact: [To be provided by TX-APWA]

Judge Signature: _____

Date: _____

This score sheet aligns with IBCA and KCBS standards and ensures a fair, organized APWA 2026 PWX National BBQ Showdown judging process. For additional details, refer to ibcabbq.org and kcbs.us or contact the event organizer.