

SMOKIN'

HOT

How three caterers who specialize in barbecue meet the growing demand for this down-home cuisine

BY SARA PEREZ WEBBER



"Barbecue may not be the road to world peace, but it's a start."
—Anthony Bourdain

Perhaps because it's associated with large, fun-filled gatherings—or maybe just because it's so darn tasty—consumers continue to go hog-wild for barbecue-style cuisine. Three caterers who specialize in barbecue tell us about their menus, their customers and how they're satisfying a need for good, old-fashioned comfort food.



This page: Nick, a Bar None team member since 2003, prepares entrees for a winery wedding (above); Bar None's custom-made chuckwagons. Opposite, clockwise from top: Santa Maria-style chicken and ribs on the grill alongside Bar None's house-made barbecue sauce and zesty ranch beans; Brigitte Zeiss and Greg Newman, founders and owners of Bar None Barbecue; a Western-themed corporate event; preparing entrees for an event.

Bar None caters about 300 events a year, with 80 percent of its business corporate events. Newman says barbecue has grown more popular for more formal social events as well. "Brides and grooms have learned that a barbecue menu at a wedding is the best way to get the highest quality food within a reasonable budget," he says.

Although the company can provide drop-off catering, "we prefer not to," says Newman. "It's not the same as having us out on site with our chuckwagon and freshly grilled entrees. We like to serve off the chuckwagon as much as possible when it comes to items like hot dogs, hamburgers and veggie burgers. Our guests absolutely love this!"

The company's chuckwagons are custom-made, utilizing handmade wheels and axles from Ohio's Amish Country. A specialty welder in San Diego builds the iron box, hand-crank and gears, and the grill screen itself, and then affixes the axles, wheels and wood to the grill box. The chuckwagons are transported on trailers with long ramps and heavy-duty winches to assist in rolling them off at events. "We use a roofer-quality propane torch to light the real wood logs, and then remove the torch to let the wood fire do the rest," says Newman. "There are no propane jets or burners on our grills, and we only use full-size, red-oak wood logs to cook our meats. We never take the easy way out by using charcoal, wood briquettes or lighter fluid, because all of these items would negatively affect the flavor."

The company follows another rule instituted when it launched in May 1998: It only caters

three events per day, a philosophy that Newman credits for Bar None's success over almost two decades. "Almost 80 percent of businesses fail within the first 18 months, and an even more staggering number is that approximately 96 percent of businesses fail within 10 years," he says. "A lot of businesses fail quickly due to inexperience, but we feel that even more businesses fail because they get greedy and start chasing the dollar. ... If a client wants a date [already booked] or requests items or services that we don't specialize in, we will politely bow out and do our best to recommend another caterer for them. It helps the customer, and builds goodwill with other San Diego catering companies."

Building strong relationships with customers has also been a key to growing the business. "Our best marketing is truly word-of-mouth from happy clients due to our unrelenting commitment to exceeding expectations," says Newman. "We keep in touch with our current customers through email marketing, special customer-only offers, and sending postcards to both returning and potential customers, offering specials and discounts. Additionally, we have a very detailed website and we keep current with blog postings about recent events as well as posting to our Facebook, Twitter and Instagram pages. We have discovered that more and more of our clients are making purchasing decisions through social media and interactions."

For 19 years, Bar None Barbecue has been serving up Santa Maria-style barbecue to fans in San Diego, who can tell they're at a Bar None event when they see the company's 6-foot-long, 1,000-pound chuckwagon.

"We cook all of the entrees that we offer over a live red-oak wood fire on our custom-made chuckwagons," says Greg Newman, president of Bar None. "Using only real wood logs makes a huge difference in flavor."

The red oak and the chuckwagon with a hand crank "that allows us to control the heat and cooking time by lowering and lifting the grill over the fire to the desired distance from the heat" differentiates Santa Maria-style barbecue, which is native to California, from other varieties, says Newman. Other hallmarks include using a dry rub instead of a wet rub or marinade; and featuring the cut of meat known as a tri-tip roast, which is the signature item of Santa Maria barbecue.

"In truly traditional Santa Maria menus, there would be no barbecue sauce but fresh salsa as a condiment, pinto beans instead of pinto beans, and garlic toast rather than ranch rolls," says Newman. "We have fine-tuned the traditional-style menu for our clients here in San Diego by creating our own barbecue sauce, an extremely popular pinto bean side dish, and a softer roll that can be used to sop up all the meaty juiciness."

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