

SIDE OF MEAT

Chief jailer's second job is the one he loves: Making savory barbecue

BY JOHN-HENRY DOUCETTE
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SUFFOLK — At 6 a.m. Saturday, a rooster crowed along Driver Lane. Across the road, William Rucker, a burly 6-footer, went about making an awful lot of barbecue.

Weekdays find him in brown and white, wearing a Portsmouth Sheriff's Office star and a major's oak leaves. He runs the City Jail.

For six years, he has had a second vocation. It involves pork butts roasted in a pig-cooker, charred over charcoal and hickory chips, and injected with sauce, long before the meat is ever chopped, placed in a bun and topped with slaw.

He remembers barbecue as part of family life. His parents, sister and he would take Sunday drives to North Carolina to visit a favored barbecue spot. Sometimes, he said, they'd even skip church.

His business, Ruck's BBQ Hut,



William Rucker, who runs the Portsmouth City Jail for his full-time job, has a second vocation — preparing and selling barbecue at special events. That might evolve into a restaurant gig one day.

is a family affair. He woke his stepson, 15-year-old D.J. Poulson Jr. D.J. walked groggily into the garage to get to work.

"It's what he likes to do," the teen said.

They loaded supplies into a

weathered pickup, which would tow the hot cooker to a stand on a lot in Driver village.

Rucker opened the pig-cooker, built from an old oil tank with Bill

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Barbecue: The secret is in the sauce, and his reels them in

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Bernard, his friend since they attended elementary school in Portsmouth.

Rucker flipped each pork butt over and fed charcoal that had already been burning in a wheelbarrow.

Rucker's wife, Cathy, joined them. Caitlyn, 10, followed. Bernard drove up, too.

He recalled cookouts where Rucker's sauce was a hit.

Rucker's sister, Carolyn Butler, may have been his biggest booster. She helped him participate in the Chesapeake Jubilee in 2000. They broke even.

"We thought we did great," Cathy Rucker said.

"That's where we started it off," Rucker said.

A man once offered Rucker \$5,000 to disclose the family recipe, Rucker said. He refused.

The Californian, as Rucker tells it, ordered a gallon of sauce for \$20.

Shipping across the country cost \$30.

Rucker, perhaps joking, said he wondered if the Californian sent it to a West Coast lab.

Vinegar and peppers are in

it. That's all he'll let slip.

In Portsmouth, lawyers, clerks and deputies order barbecue.

He lets people have a taste - he reels them in, he said, "kind of like a drug dealer."

Much of the business is on-site catering and small festivals, such as the Driver Village Spring Festival on Saturday and Sunday. For larger celebrations, Rucker might sell 970 pounds. This weekend, he anticipated 300 pounds.

Rucker joined the Sheriff's Office when he was 18. He was old enough to serve but young enough that his parents had to buy practice ammunition.

He worked the jailhouse floor, served as a bailiff and oversaw civil process before rising to his current post.

Rucker said he has promised Sheriff Bill Watson that he'd stick around for Watson's first term.

After that, he'd like to have a place to sell some barbecue. So would Bernard, presently in the construction business.

"A small place," Bernard said. "It would be nice."

By early morning, people



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William Rucker and his wife, Cathy, at the Driver Village Spring Festival this weekend, have turned the barbecue endeavor into a family affair. Their children often help out, too.

started coming up to the hut - a long tent.

"Delicious," said Severn Warrington, retired from a peanut mill.

"I cook barbecue myself, and this is as good or better than what I cook."

On Sunday, the weather cooled and rain approached.

They cleared 300 pounds, not including what was cooked for a wedding on Saturday. People gathered by the pig-cooker for warmth.

"My mom and dad and sister used to say how proud they are of me," Rucker said.

He lost his parents within a month of each other in 1999. His father had been ailing. His mom's death was more of a shock. It was like she grieved herself to death, he said. His parents had been married 50 years.

Rucker remembered talking with his sister at the Jubilee and saying he wished his parents could have been there.

She put her arms around her brother. She said they were.

Carolyn Butler died in 2004. Remembering when she told him she didn't want to fight the cancer anymore, he choked up.

Soon after, Rucker explained something that doesn't make sense to him about the jail: men who are in there because they won't provide for their families.

"Family's about the most important thing for anybody," Rucker said.

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