

# Guy Fieri, Kid Chef Competitions, and Pure Joy Collide at the State Fair

This year's Texas State Fair featured a children's barbecue competition. With Guy Fieri.

By [Caitlin Cruz](#)

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Guy Fieri co-hosts the Carnival Kids BBQ Competition at the State Fair of Texas.

Photograph by Creagh Cross

With 45 minutes left before the big show, picnic tables in front of the stage were already packed. So 22-year-old Aren Salazar—who skipped work in Austin to rush to the event—was forced to stand off to the side of the tables, just behind the merch table. She didn't seem to mind. That, perhaps, was partly due to the large sun shades keeping the area slightly cooler on the bright afternoon. But mostly, it's because Salazar is a *huge* Guy Fieri fan.

Her fandom surprised me at first. (And Salazar wasn't the only super fan there. A small but hopeful group gathered after the competition, hoping for a meet-and-greet at the black velvet ropes. One kid asked for my media pass.) I



love food, but I've never geeked out enough to travel three hours to see a chef. But Fieri, to the faithful, is much more than just a chef on TV—he's a personality. His bleach-blond frosted tips and enthusiasm for less-than-gourmet foodstuffs seem like a joke to some, but to others, it's infectious.

Although their devotion might not run as deep as Salazar's, no doubt most of the large crowd gathered at the Texas State Fair's Carnival Cruise-sponsored stage on Wednesday afternoon came for the Mayor of Flavortown, who was in Dallas to host a children's barbecue competition. The premise alone sounds like an absurd invention of the internet, which Salazar seemed to recognize. Along with her friend Stephanie Sanchez, Salazar made the trip even though she wasn't entirely sure it was a real Guy Fieri appearance. After all, the two agreed, the *Diners, Drive-Ins, and Dives* star is such a meme. "I was like, 'I'm not sure if it's true, but I'm going to be here just in case,'" Salazar said.

And boy, did Salazar come prepared. She had on her flame socks, an homage to the famed flame shirt that Fieri apparently hates (they were sold out of socks printed with Fieri's face), and came with her custom-made phone case—which featured a repeating print of Fieri's face, alternately screaming and smiling. Once the friends got to the fair, they realized that the trip up Interstate-35 had paid off: it was, in fact, real. Fieri would soon be there to host a barbecue competition for 4-H children. "It's as close to a dream as there is," Salazar gushed.

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It was also, no doubt, a dream for the adolescents who would soon take the stage. Fieri was clearly the main draw for people like Salazar, and me. He's the reason I told my editor I needed to be at the fair that day. But there's also something about watching people earnestly do something they love. Watching kids chop onions, and taste their sauces and jams, all the while stressed about the flavor profile of their dishes—it's exactly what I needed during a trying week. Because I too was in 4-H once, tackling fun (and practical!) activities such as quilting and cross-stitching and pretty much every type of crafting. It was so wonderful to remember how happy accomplishing a project made me. The determination and joy from the kids cooking onstage made Wednesday that much better: a high bar to clear at the ultimate event of joy.

The contestants were selected after sending in a recipe inspired by Fieri's Pig & Anchor Bar-B-Que Smokehouse, a restaurant featured on a few Carnival Cruise ships. (The afternoon was nothing if not properly branded.) Hundreds of entries were submitted, but only three contestants took the stage. At the station closest to the judges' table was the incredibly well-mannered Sam Penn, of Murphy. Blue-haired Dallasite Harper Burt took the

middle station. And our final battler was Charlotte Murray, of Corinth.

They each had thirty minutes to create their Fieri-inspired barbecue dish, which would be judged on creativity, taste, and presentation by a panel of three judges: David B. Knight of Ole Hickory Pits; *Texas Monthly's* own barbecue snob, Daniel Vaughn; and Lockhart Smokehouse's Jill Bergus.

Let's get cooking!

The thirty minutes, devoid of the quick cut editing in a round of *Chopped*, seemed to stretch forever. Fieri talked with the chefs about their ingredients, and their adult assistants helped find ingredients or tools or open boxes of aluminum foil. After tasting Sam's homemade barbecue sauce, Fieri told him, "You're in good shape, buddy."

Around the twelve-minutes-to-go mark, a small child stormed up to the stage, carrying an adorable, if dingy, stuffed panda bear and a gift for Guy: Texas toffee. After Fieri asked the child if he had lost his front teeth eating Texas toffee, the stage crasher was asked to set down Fluffy, the panda bear, and throw out some of the freebies.

It was all very darling until the kid hit me with a water bottle. I was writing some notes like *told the story of losing his teeth* and *ppl storming the stage* when a plastic Carnival Cruise bottle hit my shoulder. (Note for branded-content events: Stick to t-shirts, y'all.) Fieri told me to pay attention. "I'll let him snipe you with one of these things," Fieri said, possibly looking at me, possibly not. It was impossible to tell through his tinted sunglasses.

Fieri, apparently satisfied now that the water bottle lobbed at my shoulder had refocused my attention, returned to mentoring the contestants. Sam, who answered every question with a "Yes, sir" or "No, sir," was working on Lone Star Pig and Cow Barbecue Sliders. Harper was hard at work on The Nutty Flying Pig in Paradise, while Charlotte created a Gold Rush Barbecue Sandwich. Of course dishes inspired by Guy Fieri needed names like those. Harper seemed to be having some trouble with her waffle iron. She told Fieri that she was going to cook the waffles, take them out, flip them and then cook them again, which seemed to confuse a few people in the audience. Fieri whispered to her outside of her mic, the two seemingly conferring about how to best approach the final touches on the waffle sandwiches.

I'm a connoisseur of cooking competition shows. (*Guy's Grocery Games* ranks toward the bottom of my go-to list, but his on-screen charisma is undeniable.) The cooking competition format at the fair, however, fell a bit flat. Normally, the editing of cooking shows we love feature color commentators (think Alton Brown on *Iron Chef America*), splice in post-

cooking interviews, or include a host who talks with contestants while they cook. I had hoped Fieri would focus more on the kids and why they were making specific choices. They know the recipe beforehand, after all. But the kids' nerve-induced laser focus, compounded by what seemed to be a difficult stage to cook on—not to mention what looked to be 100 people watching—made for pretty silent contestants. It was understandable.

So instead, Fieri took questions from the audience. Together, we learned about how his barbecue restaurant on the cruise ship got started—one of the judges, David B. Knight of Ole Hickory Pits built a pit that could be taken out onto an all-electric ship, so the meat could be cooked low and slow as God intended. Fieri also mentioned that he and some buddies would be feeding evacuees of the uncontrollable wildfires in northern California, where the chef lives. “We’re blessed to be in the greatest country in the world,” Fieri said, adding it was important to give back when you can. And that, after all, was why he was there, talking with kids who love cooking and want to eat healthy and understand how nutrition works. It’s where the focus of his foundation and the mission of 4-H intersect.

But back to the kids! With two minutes to go, the race to plate the dishes prompted cheers from the crowd. Charlotte was plating her side salad with baby tongs! Harper was cleaning the edges of her plates like a pro! Sam seemed really calm and confident as he finished! It’s nerve-wracking to watch chefs cook down to the wire, even more so in person. I knew they wouldn’t let the kids serve unfinished foods to the judges; the contestants were only 10, 12, and 13, after all. But in the moment, I didn’t *know* what would happen if they couldn’t beat the clock. But three chefs finished to huge applause from the crowd! They did it! I was sitting next to Sam’s father and grandmother, who were definitely among the loudest cheering section.

Then, the focus shifted to the judges’ table.

Harper’s Nutty Flying Pig in Paradise (or waffle chicken sandwiches) were a big hit. “Waffles were spot-on,” Knight concluded. Vaughn thought the waffles could be a bit crisper, but the bacon and pecans gave it “a nice flavor.” Fieri—who was only serving as the host and mentor, but snuck tastes of the dishes—gave her high marks because her creativity helped bring in a new texture to the dish, which even seasoned professionals can sometimes forget.

Next up was Sam and his Lone Star Pig and Cow Barbecue Sliders. He combined jalapeño-cheddar sausage, for a kick, with brisket, adding in homemade barbecue sauce and thin slices of Gala apple to “give it a mildly sweet flavor.” But he wasn’t going to let that hint of fruit be the focus. “It’s not sweet at all. It’s bold and spicy just like Texas,” Sam told the judges. Vaughn had never had a Gala apple on a slider, but ended up loving the surprise

combination.

Finally, Charlotte and her Gold Rush Barbecue Sandwich were up. It had brisket and a macaroni-and-cheese patty crusted with corn flakes, set between slices of Texas toast. “You’re a culinary gangster, young lady,” Fieri said, clearly impressed by her creativity. Vaughn thought the toast, while tasty, was almost too thick, and distracted from the patty, the dish’s true cornerstone. Knight, meanwhile, thought it was delicious.

And then it was time to tally the scores. Remember: creativity, taste, and presentation. The judges made their decision. A hush fell over the crowd (as much as possible, next to the State Fair’s Midway) as Fieri started the announcement.

“That young superstar chef will be...” Fieri said, drawing out the pause for dramatic effect.

Someone in the audience shouted *Drumroll!* And people quickly obliged. “Thank you for the drumroll,” Fieri said. “Ladies and gentleman, our champ . . . CHEF HARPER!”

Our contestant at the middle station with the waffle sandwich had won, and I’m pretty sure it was the first time she smiled all day! Thirteen-year-old Harper Burt received a Pig & Anchor chef’s apron *and* a Carnival Cruise trip for her family. “I’m going to take my friend too,” she told me later.

After the troubles with the waffle iron, her pecan waffles as a bun substitute had prevailed. I asked her to elaborate on the winning chicken sandwich recipe. “Chicken and waffles is a big Southern thing, so I decided to put them together. I went to this restaurant called **Knife** and they had this really good bacon jam so I decided to recreate that,” she said.

Harper added pineapple juice to the chicken rub with adobo seasoning because it’s included in Fieri’s barbecue sauce. “I was really nervous,” she admitted, adding that she didn’t think she was going to win.

She couldn’t stop smiling. Neither could I.

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