

20 Years of Cooking

Twenty years after the first skit was performed, the All-American Certified Angus Beef® Cook-Off still provides a creative outlet for juniors.

by *Stephanie Veldman*

On a sweltering July day at the Iowa State Fairgrounds, nine junior and four adult teams competed in an outdoor arena in 106-degree heat. It was 1983, and the American Angus Auxiliary was sponsoring its first Cook-Off at the National Junior Angus Show (NJAS) in Des Moines, Iowa.

From its humble beginnings, the Auxiliary-sponsored All-American Certified Angus Beef® Cook-Off has grown and endured. This year, at the NJAS in Louisville, Ky., the Cook-Off celebrated its 20th anniversary.

Co-founders Anne Patton Schubert, Taylorsville, Ky., and Ardyce O'Neill, Logan, Iowa, fondly recall that first event, called the Great Ground Round Cook-Off because participants were only allowed to use ground beef.

"It was wonderful — hot and sticky

— but it was great," Schubert says. "When you first start something, you don't know if you are going to even have three entries. We ended up with 12, which we thought was good for the first year."

"That first year, quite frankly, felt like the blind leading the blind," O'Neill says, laughing. "We hadn't a clue what we were doing. Somehow we organized, had everything set up and got them going. It

worked, and I think we were both just terribly surprised that we did it."

After 20 years, no one quite recalls where the idea for the Cook-Off originated, but the purpose of it is still crystal clear.

"We decided the kids needed to know how to talk about beef, and we wanted to give them the opportunity," Schubert says. "Our theory was to do some sort of fun, creative approach. We decided to do both a recipe award and a showmanship award."

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► **Left:** Paul St. Blanc (right), Charenton, La., claimed recipe and showmanship honors in the adult division with "Cajun Dirty Rice" during the first Auxiliary-sponsored Cook-Off in 1983. Ardyce O'Neill (left), coordinator of the event, and Anne Patton Gorham (now Schubert), then president of the American Angus Auxiliary, congratulate him.



► Participants, like the California team, enjoyed themselves at the first Cook-Off event.



► **Above:** Parents are often involved in the behind-the-scenes activities during the Cook-Off. Schubert says it is important to have parental involvement, especially around the grill. When the youth are doing the presentation for the judges, she adds, they are on their own.



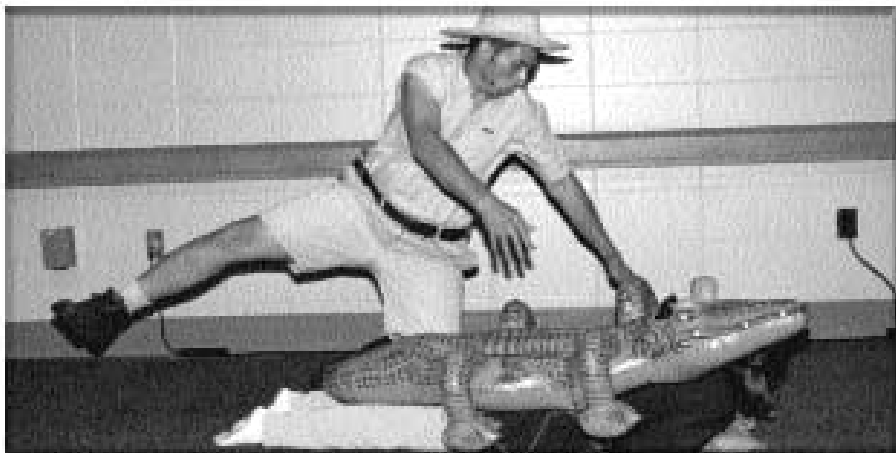
► Judges enjoy sampling the many recipes they evaluate. Schubert tries to bring alumni judges back each year, mixing them with new faces from the area where the NJAS is being located that year.



► Anne Patton Schubert, co-founder of the Cook-Off, says the Cook-Off was started to teach youth how to talk about beef. "Our theory was to do some sort of fun, creative approach," she says.



► Ashley Drake (left) and Dee Dee Lawson of Oklahoma won the showmanship category with a Sooner pioneer meal and presentation at the Cook-Off in 1987.



► A crocodile hunter reaches to catch his prey during a skit at the 2003 Cook-Off. Each team has five minutes to complete their skit while being judged on showmanship.

A familiar face

The success of any event is measured by the amount of support it receives from volunteers and participants. There have been several faces that have made the All-American *Certified Angus Beef*® Cook-Off a success in the last 20 years, but one of the most notable was the late Paul St. Blanc, Charenton, La.

He participated in the first Cook-Off in 1983 and was a familiar face at Cook-Off events until his death in 1999. His most famous recipe, Jambalaya, was cooked in a large black kettle. He usually cooked enough for everyone who wanted to eat.

“He participated in every Cook-Off he went to, whether he was competing or helping kids on the sidelines,” says Anne St. Blanc Lampe, Scott City, Kan. “My dad loved to cook, and he was such a believer in the CAB program. The Cook-Off tied these things together for him.”

In 2000 the St. Blanc family presented the first Black Kettle Award — an award depicting St. Blanc with his black kettle on an acrylic piece — to the overall winner of the Cook-Off.

“We wanted to do a memorial, and a lot of the monetary gifts coming in were from Angus people. It didn’t take us long to decide this is where we wanted it to go,” Lampe says.

“It meant so much to all of us, because we really knew how much he cared and how much he enjoyed it,” says Cook-Off co-founder Anne Patton Schubert, Taylorsville, Ky.

Each year, members of the family present the award during the awards ceremony at the National Junior Angus Show (NJAS). “The award is well-received by the people who have gotten it, and we’ve gotten some wonderful thank-you notes and different things from kids who have won it,” Lampe says. “It has been special that some of the people who have known him have been able to take it home.”

As a tribute to their father and grandfather, St. Blanc’s daughters, Anne and Melanie (Kiani); their children, Garrett, Clayton, Emma and Clint; and St. Blanc’s son, Casey, made the jambalaya at the 2003 NJAS in Louisville, Ky. The skit they performed celebrated the Cook-Off’s 20th anniversary, and they planned to feed all who wanted to try the special dish. Lampe says, “The recipe we sent in for the cookbook is just a family-size recipe, but we are actually going to use Dad’s big pot and make a hundred or better servings so we can share it with as many people as we can.”



► Casey St. Blanc makes his father’s famous Jambalaya recipe in the black kettle.

► Melanie St. Blanc Kiani (left) and Anne St. Blanc Lampe set up for the skit they performed in honor of the Cook-Off’s 20th anniversary as a tribute to their father, Paul St. Blanc.

The next step

“I don’t know how we had the nerve to try a second contest, but Ardyce and I were bouncing the idea around — should we or shouldn’t we,” Schubert recalls. “I was on vacation with my husband and son, and on this trip Ardyce kept getting entries. She called me and told me we were going to have a contest. Since then it has just taken off.”

O’Neill says that Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) began supplying the meat for the contest in 1988. The event was officially named the All-American *Certified Angus Beef* Cook-Off in Louisville in 1989.

It wasn’t until 1991, when the Cook-Off was included in the sweepstakes point system, that participation really grew.

“Those first few years we had to call and call to get entries,” O’Neill says. “We would take entries the day they walked onto the fairgrounds. It took a lot of persuasion to get the states to enter.”

New divisions

For several years CAB has provided any fresh cut of meat a junior requested in the amount they needed for their recipes. In 2000 a new division was added to the Cook-Off. The Quick-N-Easy™ division enabled teams to incorporate the precooked CAB® brand meats in a creative recipe.

“The first year we used two or three basic Quick-N-Easy products. This year we’ve expanded to six or eight items. There are a few new ones we’ve talked about using, but they are not available in the retail-size portions yet,” Schubert says.

CAB has also created a line of deli meats, prompting the Cook-Off to add a third division, deli meats, this year.

“You are judged on originality in the deli and Quick-N-Easy because it is already cooked for you,” O’Neill says.

Schubert says that this year there were 10 deli entries, which she considers very successful for the category’s first year. “As long as you continue to offer new things, it gets better, and as long as it is fun and creative, it works,” she says.

Cook-Off rules

Rules for the contest are kept to a minimum, O’Neill says. “We don’t have all that many rules because we want the kids to enjoy, but we expect them to abide by the rules that are established.”

Those rules include a five-minute time limit on skits; only one team per state age division per category; and a limit of two to six members per team. There are four age

divisions — junior, intermediate, senior and adult. The rules allow youth to move up in age divisions, but an older member can't compete in a younger division.

"It is a family thing, because adults and children have to work together on this," O'Neill says.

Schubert adds that she believes parental involvement is very important, especially around the grill.

"When people fuss at me about too many parents helping, my comment is, 'I don't think you can ever have too many parents helping.' We've never had accidents, which is a very good thing," she says. "I don't think there can be too much help around the grill."

She points out that when the youth are doing the presentation for the judges they are on their own.

Flexibility is key

Schubert attributes the success and longevity of the Cook-Off to its flexibility regarding individual participant's needs.

O'Neill agrees with her, saying that if it isn't enjoyable, kids won't want to participate. "Kids just want to live for the moment, and it does have to be flexible to allow them to do that," she says. "There are a lot of people who aren't capable of being that flexible, and that is why the kids like Anne so much. She'll take everything under consideration. And if it can be done, she'll make sure it gets done."

Schubert says flexibility is also important because the location of the event is different every year. The Cook-Off has been performed on dirt floors, behind backdrops, in buildings with no air conditioning and outdoors. Participants even had to share the PA system with the show one year. Being able to quickly adapt to each of these settings can be challenging.

"You never know what the situation is going to be. Every year we are at a different location. Every year the building is a little different, the facilities are a little different, the options are different, but the kids do a wonderful job of adapting to that. That is what makes it work," she says.

O'Neill says that having a contact person in the host state who is familiar with the contest and who has connections at the facilities is most important in preparing for the Cook-Off.

"We have worked in some of the most atrocious facilities in the world, and it is impossible for Anne to make a trip to the fairgrounds at any point unless she lives close to the state," O'Neill says. "You need



► Dru Uden, Franklin, Neb., skewers the competition as Jill Rishel, North Platte, Neb., looks on. The Nebraska team harpooned several species — fish, turkey, pork and chicken — at the Cook-Off in 1988, and established beef and Angus supremacy on Planet Angus.



► O'Neill and Schubert agree that the Cook-Off has drifted away from its original intent — to have youth take their skits, recipes and performances back to their home states. Schubert says she would like to see state associations make use of the skits. "These kids are so good; we need not limit them to the NJAS audience," she says.

someone who is good, who is familiar with your facilities and familiar with the people who can help set it up."

Since the 1995 NJAS in Louisville, the Cook-Off has been held in multiple rooms to accommodate for an increasing number of participating teams.

"When we got the separate rooms, we got more credibility, and it puts a lot more class to our event," O'Neill says. "I think people regard it as something they do want to go see and possibly participate in themselves someday."

The future

O'Neill and Schubert agree that the Cook-Off has drifted away from its original intent — to have youth take their skits, recipes and performances back to their home states.

"We'd really like to see them do that, even if they just did it outside the cattle barn at their state fair and handed the recipe out," O'Neill says.

Schubert says she wants to see state associations make use of the skits. "I wish our states would make use (of the skits) by inviting these groups to do something back home after it is done here. You have a built-in PR opportunity with the kids who would love to do it," Schubert says. "These kids are so good; we need not limit them to the NJAS audience."

O'Neill says she feels ideas for the Cook-Off itself are limitless because new junior members are always participating and new sets of parents are always helping.

She says, "If you keep pace with the times, and if you listen to what people are saying and accommodate them as much as you can, then things do last."

