



Meat Smoking Judging Criteria 2026

Tomahawk Judging Criteria

Appearance (20 Points)

Judges will first evaluate the visual presentation of the tomahawk steak. An exceptional entry should have a rich, appetizing crust with an even mahogany or deep golden-brown sear that reflects proper cooking technique. The steak should be sliced cleanly to showcase a consistent internal doneness throughout. The meat should appear juicy and moist, never dry or gray. If garnishes, finishing butter, or sauces are used, they should enhance the presentation without overwhelming the steak. The tomahawk bone should be clean and neatly presented, contributing to an attractive and professional appearance. Overall, the steak should immediately create anticipation for the first bite.

Texture & Tenderness (25 Points)

Texture is one of the defining qualities of a great tomahawk steak. Judges will be looking for beef that is tender, juicy, and easy to bite through while maintaining the satisfying

texture expected from a premium ribeye. The steak should not be tough, chewy, stringy, or dry. Proper rendering of the marbling is essential, creating a rich, buttery mouthfeel without excessive unrendered fat. The exterior crust should provide a pleasant contrast to the tender interior without being burnt or overly hard. A perfectly cooked steak should deliver tenderness, juiciness, and a balanced bite from edge to center.

Flavor (35 Points)

Flavor is the centerpiece of the competition. Judges will carefully evaluate the balance of beef, seasoning, smoke, and any finishing elements. The natural richness of the tomahawk should remain the dominant flavor, supported—not masked—by seasonings. Salt, pepper, herbs, spices, and smoke should work together harmoniously without becoming overpowering. Smoke should be noticeable but balanced, never bitter or acrid. If sauces, glazes, or compound butters are used, they should complement the beef rather than dominate it. A winning steak will deliver bold yet refined flavor with depth and complexity that remains enjoyable from the first bite to the last.

Taste Balance (10 Points)

Beyond overall flavor, judges will assess how well the individual elements work together. The steak should achieve a harmonious balance between richness, seasoning, smoke, and any additional flavors. No single component should overpower the others. The seasoning should enhance the natural beef flavor while maintaining a clean, satisfying finish. The aftertaste should be pleasant and memorable, encouraging another bite rather than leaving an overly salty, smoky, or heavy impression.

Creativity & Originality (10 Points)

While the tomahawk steak is an iconic barbecue cut, thoughtful creativity can elevate an entry. Judges will recognize unique seasoning blends, wood selections, finishing techniques, regional barbecue influences, or distinctive flavor combinations that enhance the steak while respecting its premium quality. Originality should showcase the competitor's personality and skill without distracting from the natural excellence of the beef. The most successful creative entries will demonstrate innovation grounded in sound barbecue fundamentals.

Overall Impression (10 Points)

This category reflects the complete dining experience. Judges will consider whether the steak excelled in appearance, tenderness, flavor, and balance while delivering an enjoyable and memorable tasting experience. The finest entries will display confidence in technique, consistency in execution, and respect for the quality of the beef. An outstanding tomahawk steak should leave judges impressed, satisfied, and eager for another bite.

Bonus Criteria (Up to 5 Extra Points)

Judges may award additional points for entries that exceed expectations through exceptional execution. A flawlessly cooked steak with outstanding presentation, perfect doneness, remarkable tenderness, or an unforgettable balance of beef flavor, seasoning, and smoke may earn bonus points. Competitors who demonstrate extraordinary craftsmanship, precision, and creativity while honoring the natural qualities of the tomahawk steak may be rewarded in this category.

Wings Judging Criteria

Appearance (20 Points)

Judges will first evaluate the wings on their visual appeal. A well-prepared wing should have a uniform, appetizing color, with a mahogany or golden-brown finish that reflects careful cooking. Wings should appear moist and juicy, not dry, shriveled, or greasy. If a glaze or sauce is applied, it should be evenly coated, glossy, and visually appealing, without clumping, excessive pooling, or burnt edges. Wings that are presented neatly, with a clean and professional appearance, will score higher. The goal is for the wings to look as good as they taste, creating anticipation for the first bite.

Texture & Tenderness (25 Points)

Texture is a critical part of judging chicken wings. Judges will be looking for wings that are tender and juicy on the inside while maintaining a pleasing bite. The skin should not be rubbery or overly chewy but should have some crispness or a pleasant texture that enhances the eating experience. Wings

that are too dry, undercooked, or tough will score lower, as will wings that are mushy or falling apart. A perfectly cooked wing should be moist and flavorful, with skin and meat working together to create an enjoyable bite.

Flavor (35 Points)

Flavor is the centerpiece of the competition, and judges will carefully evaluate the balance of seasoning, smoke, and sauce. The wings should have a well-developed flavor profile, with seasoning that enhances the chicken without being too salty, bland, or overpowering. Smoke should be present but balanced—never bitter, harsh, or acrid. If sauce or glaze is used, it should complement the seasoning and smoke, adding depth without dominating the natural flavor of the chicken. Dry-rub wings should carry a flavorful bark or crust that pairs well with the juicy interior. A winning wing will be layered with flavor from the first bite to the last, leaving a satisfying and memorable impression.

Taste Balance (10 Points)

Beyond the overall flavor, judges will assess the harmony of the wings' taste profile. The wings should not lean too heavily toward sweet, spicy, smoky, or salty, but instead present a balanced and cohesive flavor experience. Whether seasoned with a dry rub or sauced with a glaze, the flavors should feel intentional and complementary. The aftertaste should be pleasant, inviting the judge to reach for another bite rather than leaving a heavy or cloying finish.

Creativity & Originality (10 Points)

While chicken wings are a barbecue classic, creativity can set an entry apart. Judges will look for unique approaches to flavor—such as innovative rubs, sauces, wood choices, or international influences—that make the wings memorable. Creativity might include a clever flavor pairing, a regional twist,

or a personal spin on a traditional style. However, originality should always enhance the wings rather than distract from them, staying rooted in barbecue fundamentals while showcasing individuality.

Overall Impression (10 Points)

This category captures the total experience of eating the wings. Judges will consider whether the wings were enjoyable from start to finish and whether they left a lasting positive impression. The best entries will combine appearance, tenderness, flavor, and balance into a cohesive whole that stands out among the competition. A truly outstanding wing should not only satisfy but also excite, making judges eager for another bite and setting itself apart as an exceptional entry.

Bonus Criteria (Up to 5 Extra Points)

Judges may award additional points for entries that rise above expectations. A wing that achieves flawless presentation, exceptional balance of smoke and seasoning, or an unforgettable flavor profile may earn these bonus points. Competitors who showcase extraordinary technique, mastery of flavor, or a bold but successful creative touch may be rewarded in this category.

Ribs Judging Criteria

Appearance (20 Points)

The first impression of the ribs comes from their look. Judges will evaluate whether the ribs have an appealing, mahogany-colored bark and a glossy finish from sauces or glazes, without looking burnt or overly charred. The surface should be appetizing, with a balanced coating of seasoning and smoke. Ribs should be presented neatly, with slices cut cleanly between bones, showing a juicy, moist interior. If a sauce is applied, it should have a uniform and intentional look, not clumpy or smeared. Overall, the ribs should look professional, mouthwatering, and ready to eat.

Texture & Tenderness (30 Points)

Tenderness is one of the most critical elements of ribs. Judges will look for a bite that pulls cleanly from the bone without the meat falling completely off. The ideal rib should have a tender, juicy bite with just the right resistance. Meat that is tough, dry, stringy, or overly chewy will score lower, while ribs that are mushy or falling apart also indicate overcooking. A perfectly cooked rib should balance tenderness with structure, creating a bite that is satisfying and easy to eat while still holding its form.

Flavor (35 Points)

Flavor is the heart of the rib experience and carries the most weight in judging. Judges will evaluate the seasoning, smoke, sauce, and overall taste of the meat. The rub or marinade should enhance the pork's natural flavor without being overly salty, sweet, or spicy. Smoke should be evident but clean, with no bitterness or acrid taste. If a sauce is applied, it should complement the ribs, not overpower them, adding depth without masking the meat. The bark should have a savory richness, while the inside should taste juicy and flavorful on its own. A winning rib will showcase balanced layers of seasoning, smoke, and sauce that highlight the pork's natural taste.

Taste Balance (10 Points)

Beyond individual flavors, judges will consider the harmony of the overall taste. The rib should not lean too heavily in one direction—whether overly sweet, spicy, smoky, or salty. Instead, every element should work together to create a cohesive and satisfying bite. A well-balanced rib allows the flavor of the pork to shine while incorporating seasoning, smoke, and sauce in harmony. The aftertaste should be pleasant and lingering without being cloying, harsh, or overly heavy.

Creativity & Originality (5 Points)

Ribs are a barbecue classic, but originality can make an entry stand out. Judges will reward thoughtful creativity in rubs, sauces, or cooking techniques that bring a fresh twist while still respecting the fundamentals of great ribs. This might include unique spice blends, unexpected glazes, or regional flavor influences. Creativity should always serve the goal of enhancing flavor and presentation—not distracting from the rib itself.

Overall Impression (10 Points)

This category reflects the entire rib experience. Judges will consider how enjoyable the ribs are from start to finish and whether they leave a lasting positive impression. An outstanding entry will combine visual appeal, tenderness, seasoning, and flavor into a cohesive and memorable whole. The question is simple: would a judge want to keep eating these ribs long after the first bite? A great rib should be both satisfying and unforgettable, standing out among the competition.

Bonus Criteria (Up to 5 Extra Points)

Judges may award additional points for ribs that go above and beyond in execution. A perfectly presented rack with exceptional tenderness, flawless seasoning, and a unique but harmonious flavor profile may earn these extra points. Bonus recognition is reserved for ribs that demonstrate exceptional skill, creativity, and mastery—those that truly elevate the competition.