

If his previous accomplishments in the world of competition barbecue didn't already put Joe Davidson in rarified air, a recent announcement by the American Royal Association launched him into orbit. Davidson, owner of five Tulsa-area Oklahoma Joe's Bar-B-Cue restaurants and winner of more than 300 trophies on the competition barbecue circuit, has been inducted into the ARA Hall of Fame. The ARA is an arm of the Kansas City Barbeque Society, which hosts the prestigious American Royal World Series of Barbecue each year in Kansas City, Missouri. It has inducted only 27 people (plus nine Legacy members) into the hall since it was established in 2012. Think about that. Of the thousands of folks who compete each year in KCBS-sanctioned events, only 27 have been inducted into the hall. Past inductees include Guy Fieri, Steven Raichlen and Davidson's former Oklahoma Joe's partner Jeff Stehney. "Imagine, two members of the hall of fame came out of Oklahoma Joe's," Davidson said recently as he prepared to welcome lunch customers at his restaurant on 61st Street. "I am absolutely flabbergasted. It's humbling, and at the same time, it's such an honor to be recognized for our accomplishments over 33 years. It couldn't have happened without the support of my wife, kids, family and friends, and to be the first Oklahoman in the hall is an amazing honor."

Davidson tossed out names such as Mike McMillan, Donny Teel, David Bouska, Paul Shatte, Danny Head and Bart Clarke, all among a number of Oklahomans who have championship pedigrees on the barbecue circuit. Among Davidson's many trophies are championships in the American Royal, Jack Daniels World Championship Invitational and the Great Pork BarbeQlossal at the World Pork Expo, all in the 1990s, just a few years after he started competing.

After placing in multiple categories in 2009 at the Memphis in May World Championship Barbecue Cooking Contest, he retired from competition. "Memphis is the Mardi Gras of competition barbecue," Davidson said. "It's the biggest party you've ever seen. I've made some of my best friends there. One reason is you are required to come in Wednesday, and you don't compete until Saturday." Davidson's team, which included brother Roger Davidson, won

Jack Daniels in 1993, BarbeQlossal in 1994 and American Royal in 1996. "We won the state championship in 1992 and the Midwest Regional championship in Gladstone, Missouri, which got us invited to the Jack Daniels," he said. "In 1993, we also won Best Barbecue Sauce on the Planet at the American Royal." Davidson, who grew up near Okemah, thought he was destined to become a college professor. He had been a welder by trade, and when he was a graduate assistant in agricultural engineering at Oklahoma State University, he designed and built his first Oklahoma Joe's smokers. "I took 12 to the state fair in Oklahoma City, and they sold out the first weekend," Davidson said. "I got orders for 108 more, and suddenly, I was in the smoker manufacturing business. Smokers changed my life forever. I felt like if I was going to make the best smokers in the world, I had to learn how to cook the best barbecue. My first competition was the T-Town Barbecue Cookoff at Mayfest in Tulsa in 1988. That also changed my life. "We placed third in brisket and fifth in poultry, and I was over the moon about that. The idea that we could compete in something where we cooked barbecue, drank beer and made new friends, well, how can you beat that?" Davidson and fellow competitor Stehney opened Oklahoma Joe's Barbecue and Catering restaurants in Stillwater and Kansas City in 1996. Two years later, Davidson sold the smoker business to W.C. Bradley Co. (Char-Broil), closed the Stillwater store and took a job in New Braunfels, Texas, with New Braunfels Smoker Co. Stehney kept the Kansas City store. When the Texas contract expired, Davidson and wife Page purchased a working ranch near Leonard, south of Bixby, in 2000. In addition to ranch work, Davidson taped barbecue instruction videos that would sell in 3,500 Walmart stores and partnered with Royal Oak Charcoal in Roswell, Georgia, to develop Sam's Club charcoal. He stayed as director of sales with Royal Oak developing grills and smokers for Walmart and Lowe's until 2009. For the next couple of years, Davidson launched a team-building business called Joe Davidson's Grill Camp targeted at

corporations. He said he would divide the participants into teams, put up tents, give them utensils and meats and “run a competition like a world championship.” “One time in Banff, Canada, doing a team-building event for Oracle, I found myself in the green room with The Who and (former Texas) congressman Charlie Wilson,” he said. “I thought, “How in the world did I wind up here?”” He said he and Page had talked about returning to the restaurant business, and one day in 2011, he noticed a building that had held a barbecue restaurant near the Bass Pro Shops in Broken Arrow was available. “I thought maybe I could buy the whole building,” Davidson said. “We got it in August and opened it in December.” Stehney, who spent his high school years in Bixby, changed the name of his restaurant to Joe’s Kansas City Bar-B-Que in 2014. Since 2011, Davidson, Page and son Ryker have concentrated on the restaurant business. Davidson’s induction ceremony is scheduled to take place Sept. 19 during the 2020 American Royal World Series of Barbecue at the Kansas Speedway. He will be inducted as Joe Don Davidson. “If you go to Okemah and ask if they know who Joe Davidson is they probably couldn’t tell you,” he said. “If you asked if they know Joe Don, they would know it was me. We still have ranch property in Okemah. Matter of fact, I’m getting ready to go do some brush hogging down there.” While in Kansas City, Davidson said he plans to compete in the American Royal for the first time in more than a decade. “I called Stehney and said, “Let’s get after it,”” Davidson said. “The great thing about winning the American Royal was that Stehney’s team was reserve grand champion the same year. “We are best friends, but we always want to kick each other’s butt. I don’t care if I finish next to last as long as Jeff is the one behind me. It’s great to get inducted, but I’m really looking forward to the competition, too.” Featured video Scott Cherry 918-581-8463 scott.cherry@tulsaworld.com Twitter: @ScottCherryTW