If you’ve ever thought about learning barbecue from a professional, this is your chance. The National Barbecue Association has brought together some very successful pitmasters that are willing to show you their tricks of the trade. The program is set up to help newcomers to the barbecue world start their journey on the right foot. A seasoned veteran shows every aspect of their barbecue operation in a three or four day training session. You might say this is a type of barbecue boot camp because you will be learning barbecue by doing what these folks do every day.

We started this program back in May, and it’s already had lots of participation. The program has the student come into the pitmaster’s place of business or competition and be involved in their everyday operation. The student also gets to pick their mentor from a list that includes successful names such as The Shed, Slick’s Que Co., Checkered Pig, Sam’s BBQ #1, and the list goes on. The complete list of mentors can be found here: [www.nbbqa.org/mentors](http://www.nbbqa.org/mentors).

Even if you’re just wanting to learn catering or competition barbecue, we have willing pitmasters that will teach you these aspects as well. That environment will be a little different, but it is still done in a hands on fashion with lots of tips and tricks that would take you years to learn on your own. The response we have gotten this far from attendees can be summed up in one word: priceless!

You can learn more about this exciting new program on the [NBBQA website](http://www.nbbqa.org) and in the following success stories.

Until next month, keep it smokin’!

Kell Phelps
[www.nbbqa.org](http://www.nbbqa.org)
When Kell Phelps introduced me to National Barbecue Association’s apprentice program, I asked him to give us a good story on what they’re doing. Just think. You could be the next massive success in the barbecue world.
If you’re like most serious barbecuers, chances are you’ve spent at least some of your time around the smoker daydreaming about opening up a successful BBQ joint. There’s a lot to like about this scenario—being your own boss, shooting the breeze with customers and serving up some of the best food in town. However, that dream can seem more like a nightmare once we realize just how little we actually know about running a restaurant.

Sure, a lot of us can smoke a mean pork butt or brisket, but transforming that backyard or competition ‘que into a consumer product that feeds scores of people throughout the day is no simple matter. Add to that health department regulations, vendor management, point-of-sale systems, hiring and firing, balance sheets, and a host of other issues you’ve got to master, and it’s little wonder so many skilled and passionate barbecue devotees choose not to pursue their dream job.

Our mission is to support the culture and industry of America’s cuisine, so we set out to help would-be BBQ entrepreneurs overcome their fears and show them exactly what it takes. Earlier this year, we celebrated the month of May—National Barbecue Month—with the launch of our Pitmaster Apprentice Program. This program offers aspiring talent a chance to experience the business of barbecue first hand. Apprentices participate in a multi-day immersion program at a successful barbecue restaurant under the guidance of an experienced pitmaster. We don’t just teach the apprentice how to make great barbecue, but cover every aspect of running the business from dishwashing to bookkeeping.

Despite the current economy, the number of barbecue establishments nationwide is growing at an impressive rate.

I don’t think we could have chosen a better time to launch this program. In recent years barbecue has continued to break out of its traditional strongholds in the South and Midwest to become a truly national phenomenon.

Despite the current economy, the number of BBQ establishments nationwide is growing at an impressive rate, especially when compared to most other types of restaurants. We may be witnessing the next great consumer trend. If this country can quickly turn a few purveyors of subs and giant burritos into huge national brands, imagine the potential that honest to goodness barbecue can unleash on a hungry America.
It also helps that BBQ joints are usually easier to get off the ground because they don’t require as much equipment as many other restaurants do. The Pitmaster Apprentice Program is all about helping people take advantage of these exciting opportunities.

Steve Starns went through our program in June. His mentors were Henry and Lisa Bechem of Right on Q BBQ. Today he’s about ready to open Southern Smoque BBQ, his new restaurant in Flowery Branch, Georgia. He told us the program really helped him see what it takes to open a restaurant:

“Projecting how much meat you’ll need… daily prep and holding… managing slow times and busy times… a lot of the benefit for me was seeing the day in and day out.”

Steve also learned the importance of being realistic when running a business. He already had his recipes and techniques when he went down there, so he didn’t think he would need much help in that area, but that’s actually where he learned one of his most valuable lessons. He told us, “Henry converted me on simplifying some of my recipes. In the restaurant business you’ll kill yourself on costs if you try to stick with competition style barbecue.” At first, Steve didn’t want to compromise his made-from-scratch recipes, but he eventually accepted the fact that competition barbecue simply doesn’t work in a restaurant setting.

He also realized that it didn’t mean you had to serve mediocre barbecue: “His food was great… when I was there for four days straight and I wasn’t sick of it—that convinced me.”

Before starting the barbecue joint, Steve worked in the television and software industries. He got started with barbecue by cooking for his church with their old stick burner. Over the years, he perfected his techniques and upgraded his equipment.

He got so many compliments about his food he decided it’s time to open a BBQ joint. Steve
has never run a restaurant, but the apprentice program really helped build his confidence. Despite all he had to learn, he was encouraged by the positive feedback the Bechems gave him. He told us, “It was a confirmation on a personal level that I could do this.”

The idea for the Pitmaster Apprentice Program was hatched during a town hall meeting at the NBBQA’s National Conference and Trade Show last March in San Diego, California. It kind of came out of nowhere. One of our members stepped up to the microphone and said, “You guys should have apprenticeships so people can learn how to run a restaurant.” We loved the idea and started working on it right away.

From there, it only took us a couple months to work out the details and recruit pitmasters who would be willing to set aside large blocks of time for mentoring. To participate, apprentice candidates complete a brief application and send it to us. Once we review the form and confirm the availability of the candidate’s requested mentor, a conference call is set up between all parties to discuss further details and ensure the apprentice and mentor are a good fit for one another.

The cost of the program is $500 per day plus travel expenses. We recommend a three or four day apprenticeship based on our curriculum, but we can make it longer or shorter to match your needs and level of experience.

This is a great opportunity to gain basic skills, fine tune or jumpstart a restaurant, or even just go through a boot camp style program as a vacation in the BBQ world. What you learn as an apprentice can save you a fortune in the long run and it’s much cheaper than a restaurant consultant.

One of our mentors is Roy Slicker, NBBQA’s president-elect and proprietor of two Slick’s Que Co. restaurants in Oregon. He opened his first restaurant in 2009 and now makes a point to help others fulfill that same dream. In addition to being a mentor for the apprentice program, he teaches a class on starting a barbecue restaurant every year at the NBBQA conference.

One of those he assisted was Patrick Murty, a 15 year veteran of the West Milton Fire Department in Ohio and adjunct instructor at the University of Illinois Fire College. Patrick’s bold decision to get into the restau-
rant business came while attending the 2010 NBBQA conference in Memphis.

Afterward he told us, “Roy and the rest of the National Barbecue Association immediately took us in. They were friendly and family oriented; it reminded us of the fire service.”

Less than a year later, Patrick opened Company 7 BBQ with a couple of fellow firefighters—who also happen to be his brother-in-law and father-in-law. It was such a hit we asked him to speak about his ten-month journey from amateur cook to restaurant owner at the 2011 conference. Earlier this year, Company 7’s barbecue sauces took first place in the Mustard Mild category and third place in the Tomato Mild category at the NBBQA Awards of Excellence competition.

Today Patrick is also a mentor in our apprentice program. His first apprentice was Kenneth Dee, a Marine Corps veteran. After attending culinary school, Kenny decided the fine dining aspect of the food industry was not for him and began focusing on barbecue. He says his participation in the program was nothing short of life-changing. In fact, he told me, “They brought out something in me that I never would have been able to do on my own. Without their help and guidance, I wouldn’t be where I am today.”

Today Kenny is in Exton, Pennsylvania in the middle of opening Corporal Dee BBQ. Out of everything he learned, Kenny is particularly grateful to Company 7 for educating him about point-of-sale systems and putting him in touch with the best vendors for his situation. One of those vendors even bottles Corporal Dee’s sauces and rubs for retail sale, something he hadn’t even considered prior to his apprenticeship.

In talking to Kenny both before and after his apprenticeship, I was personally struck by his sincerity. Yes, he served his country in the military, but he’s also just as quick to point out that he was adopted and how it impacted his life; this is a man with experience in giving to others. I have no doubt that with a little time and experience Kenny will be eager to help mentor others who were once like him, dreaming of their first BBQ joint.

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While we intend to make the time at the mentor’s restaurant the ultimate learning experience, it’s certainly not the end of the apprenticeship. We provide all of our apprentices with a complimentary one-year
membership that gives them access to a host of downloadable resources, such as press release samples and sidework sheet templates. We strongly encourage mentors to stay in touch with their apprentices and be available for them. Both Dee and Starns agree this has been the case.

“Any time I need anything I can call or email them and they’ll get right back to me,” Dee says of his relationship with Murty and the rest of the team at Company 7.

Now that many of the first apprentices have opened their own restaurants, we are making plans of expanding the program. With barbecue caterers and retailers recruited to serve as mentors, we’re moving into the next phase of our plan, which is to make this about more than just restaurants. In fact, we’ve already received our first application for a non-restaurant apprenticeship.

In a short time, we have seen this project start from nothing and grow into a successful program, and we look forward to creating many more success stories in the barbecue world.

Tell your story. We want to hear it.

We are looking for more success stories to share with our readers. If you have one to tell, email me at write@storyque.com, and we’ll work out the details.

Besides the story, we need a few good photos of you, your smoker or grill, and some food you’ve cooked.

—Lavern