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Barbecue contest pitting top-notch teams to highlight inaugural fest this weekend

Savory entertainment will be heating up downtown Grafton this weekend.

Fifteen national and local barbecue teams are schedule to vie for honors at the inaugural Grillin' in Grafton, a two-day event that will also feature live music, artisans, vendors and other attractions.

The open-air street celebration, billed as "Wisconsin's No. 1 Barbecue Festival," will be centered at the intersection of 12th Avenue and Bridge Street and extend north to Washington Street (Highway 60) and east to 13th Avenue.

"It's going to be a great time. We're hoping for thousands of people," said Pam King, administrative assistant for Celebrate Grafton, the committee that is hosting the festival.

"It's the first time Grafton has had something like this, so it's very exciting."

Grillin' in Grafton — to be held from noon to 10 p.m. Saturday and noon to 9 p.m. Sunday — has been sanctioned by the Kansas City Barbeque Society, the world's largest organization of competitive grilling. Among the participating teams will be the Smokin' C's, a local group captained by Grafton resident Chad Cooke; Smokey and the One Arm Bandit; and Burnita Bar-B-Que Boys.

Prizes totaling nearly $3,000 will be awarded to teams after they prepare chicken, ribs, pork and brisket. The winner will be crowned Grafton champion, qualify for the American Royal World Series of Barbeque and be placed in a drawing pool for the Jack Daniels World Championship Cook-off.

"The Kansas City Barbeque Society has a huge following," King said. "Because this is actually a sanctioned event, we have the best chance to attract the top grillers."

Most of the teams will have their grilling stations on Bridge Street, where spectators can watch them work. Some teams will have fare available to sample or buy, but the spectacle of colorful cooking units preparing secret specialties is the chief attraction, King noted.

"It goes on almost nonstop. They cook all Saturday and through most of Sunday," she said. "Grillers do this at festivals throughout the country, rain or shine, summer or winter."

The competition ends at noon Sunday, when a panel of nine judges will rate the entries at an off-site location. The winners will be announced by 4 p.m.

Besides world-class barbecue, the festival menu offers round-the-clock music on main and

family stages. Starting at noon each day, 15 bands and solo artists will perform, including headliners Green Thirteen, Shy Violet and Hooked on Sonics.

The family stage will also have live DJ and karaoke music.

Throughout the festival, local vendors will sell a variety of food and beverages.

The festival area will be fenced off, with entry limited to three gates — at Highway 60 and 12th Avenue, 13th Avenue and Bridge Street, and Wisconsin Avenue and Bridge Street. Admission is a suggested donation of $3, with proceeds going to Celebrate Grafton, King said.

Although streets will be closed to vehicular traffic, downtown merchants will be open for regular business hours.

The festival is being presented by StarEvents, a Chicago-based company that is one of the Midwest's largest festival production firms. King said the event is designed to bring a new form of entertainment to Grafton and attract first-time visitors to the community.

"One of the committee's goals it to promote Grafton and encourage tourism," she said. "This kind of event puts us in touch with a bigger market."

For more information on Grillin' in Grafton, visit www.celebrategrafton.com.