



music



# Country Cooking

Zac Brown doesn't make concessions when it comes to food on the road. And he doesn't want his fans to either

by MATT HENDRICKSON

A CONCERT IS ABOUT THE LAST PLACE you'd expect to find a good home-cooked meal. But when country star Zac Brown puts on a show, he doesn't just want his fans to enjoy the music. He wants them to be well fed.

At each show, Brown and chef Rusty Hamlin welcome some 150 lucky fans to join the band for a preshow feast. Most country stars have always maintained a tight connection with their fan base. Even megastars like Kenny Chesney and Taylor Swift still do meet and greets. But Brown and Hamlin have taken the idea to a whole new level, conducting hour-long Eat and Greets. And they're not serving burgers and dogs.

Hamlin uses a fifty-four-foot trailer—nicknamed Cookie—to whip up spreads of beef and pork tenderloin (sauced and spiced with Brown's own family recipes), "pocketknife slaw" (a Brown family favorite made by his father on deer hunting trips), as well as three other vegetable sides using ingredients plucked that day from local farms or farmers' markets. "It's the challenge of innovation," Brown says. "A lot of people make music and they're good at it, but we wanted a unique way to connect with our fans."

For the thirty-three-year-old Brown, food and music have long been intertwined. He grew up in Cumming and Dahlonega, Georgia, in a family of twelve children, and meals were a constant wave of food. Meanwhile, he became engrossed in the country music his father played. When Brown began to play solo gigs as a teenager, the fare offered at most of the venues disgusted him. "It was all frozen stuff to fry," he remembers. "It went against everything I knew about food and how to make it."

Taking matters into his own hands, Brown—with his father's help—in 2004 opened up Zac's Place, a music club and restaurant on Georgia's Lake Oconee, where they hand cut their steaks and made sauces and dressings from scratch. By then, he had formed the first incarnation of the Zac Brown Band. "Many times a line cook wouldn't show up, so I'd be back there cooking until nine or so, then jumping onstage," he says. He'd also struck up a friendship with Hamlin, chef and owner of the Atlanta restaurant Atkins Park Tavern.

**Meals on Wheels**  
Zac Brown (left) and chef Rusty Hamlin.  
Top: Hamlin's mobile kitchen, Cookie

"We'd sit around for hours and talk food and music, hoping that one day we could bring both to a larger group," Hamlin says.

Though Zac's Place was eventually sold, the ZBB finally hit it big with its 2008 effort *The Foundation*, fueled appropriately enough by the monster single "Chicken Fried." Since then, Hamlin has gone on the road with the band, cooking not only for the Eat and Greets but also for the eighty-person crew as well as for a couple of hundred concertgoers who buy tickets to sit in specially designed stage boxes at select shows. Hamlin and Brown have also worked several weekend festivals, where Hamlin oversees all of the cooking and concessions for more than twenty thousand people (look for the next one in Charleston, South Carolina, in late October). "I grew up in a big family, and everyone got fed," Brown says. "It's always been a part of my life, and with Rusty, we want to make it happen for everyone." 🍴