ORLANDO, Fla., Sept. 11 -- It may have been their first major barbecue competition, but Smokey Bones BBQ Sports Bar--Orlando, Fla.-based Darden Restaurant's latest test restaurant--put together a team of experts who showed 14 other top-notch barbecuers they have what it takes to compete against some of the nation's best.

Smokey Bones' Executive Chef John Radcliff, Sous Chef Eric Ebersbach, and fellow team members Jennifer Manette, Preston Moore, and Brian Walker traveled from Orlando to Tallahassee, Fla., to compete in the "Big Bend Pig Fest and Feast" on Friday, Sept. 1 and Saturday, Sept. 2. The team placed first in "hot chicken wings," second in "pork ribs" and fifth in "pork shoulder."

In the barbecue world, serious competitors get together to compare notes, test recipes, and tempt the judges' palates several times a year in competitions like "Big Bend" that are "sanctioned" by the granddaddy of all barbecue competitions -- the "Memphis in May" World Championships. During these events, taste talks and winners go on to compete in the biggest event of the year in Memphis, Tenn.

Because of their strong showing in Tallahassee, Smokey Bones secured a spot in the world championships where they'll go up against 300 national-level teams, most of whom compete all year.

Radcliff said his team is up for the Memphis challenge and ready to show what they can do. "With all of the top teams that showed up this year, we were happy to hold our own," he said. "We've worked hard on our recipes and know we have great-tasting barbecue. We're just excited that the judges in Tallahassee felt the same way."

Smokey Bones BBQ Sports Bar is Darden's newest internally developed concept, with two restaurants operating in Orlando and a third opening in Columbus, Ohio. The company said initial results are very encouraging and the sports bar/barbecue mix in a mountain lodge setting is proving to have broad appeal for sports fans, families, and singles.

Darden Restaurants Inc. (NYSE: DRI) also owns and operates Red Lobster, Olive Garden, and Bahama Breeze restaurants.