



The Cutchogue barbecue sells out every year, with thousands of tickets sold.

# In 1979, The New York Times food writer Florence Fabricant wrote an article with a headline that surely raised some eyebrows.

In “When 3,000 People Come for Dinner,” which ran in the Aug. 19, 1979, edition of the *Gray Lady*, Fabricant told the story of the then-23-year-old August tradition of the Cutchogue Fire Department Chicken Barbecue. At the annual fundraising event, the volunteer fire department sold around — usually over — 3,000 chicken dinners, all prepared and cooked by the village’s firemen and the department’s Ladies Auxiliary group.

Fabricant interviewed the event’s 1958 chairman, Bill Midgley, who detailed the 1957 origins of the barbecue. The department, it seemed, was low on funds, with less than \$100 in its coffers. That first chicken barbecue filled them back up, with around 800 attendees in its first year.

The Cutchogue Fire Department is gearing up to host its 67th annual Chicken Barbecue, and while the numbers have gone up, as well as the price — in 1957 it was only \$2.50 for half a chicken, potato salad, corn, veggies and ice cream with fresh peaches on top, as opposed to \$35 now — the tradition is largely the same. The event is still run by members of the fire department and its Ladies Auxiliary. There’s still good chicken, ice cream with fresh peaches and all the corn you could ever want, served under a big tent. But today, tickets to the Chicken Barbecue sell out so fast that there’s a waiting list.

What made this barbecue such a success? Is it the feeling of camaraderie as the entire department works together to host the biggest barbecue of summer? Is it the secret sauce with a recipe so closely guarded that even Martha Stewart couldn’t get it? Or could it be the fact that there are still folks involved who were there from the very beginning in 1957?

The answer is a little bit of everything.

## FROM HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

The Cutchogue Fire Department Chicken Barbecue — which touts itself as Long Island’s largest chicken barbecue, cooking more than 3,000 chickens each year — is one of several on the East End. And while the Cutchogue event is certainly the biggest, the North Fork and East End are no strangers to a chicken barbecue fundraiser, with Greenport hosting a smaller annual barbecue and Shelter Island denizens fondly recalling a beloved, now-defunct tradition.

“We had never done anything like this before,” says Elizabeth MacNish, a former member of the Ladies Auxiliary who was at the first barbecue in 1957 when her late husband, Richard, was a member of the department. “The women from the auxiliary would cook 50 pounds of potatoes, take it up [to the firehouse] and make the potato salad.”

MacNish, who has lived on the North Fork for 87 years, has seen the event grow and grow.

“I was in it for about 15 years,” she recalls. “Every year more people would come. We figured it had to be pretty good if more people were coming and every year it just continued [to grow]. The main thing was getting together and laughing and working and not realizing you were working because you were having so much fun.”

Like many families, MacNish’s children, including Mark MacNish, the current executive director of Cutchogue-New Suffolk Historical Council, participated in the event as kids, shucking corn and helping out until they got older.

Bill Brewer grew up around the department and by proxy, the barbecue — his father was a member, and his mother was part of the ladies auxiliary. Brewer came up in the department, starting as a junior firefighter and now, after 32 years, is the chief. He recalls attending his first chicken barbecue at just 8 years old.

## WINNER, WINNER CHICKEN DINNER

One of the long-standing traditions of the barbecue is the chairman role. The chairman oversees the planning, from broad strokes — making sure the chicken and corn are ordered — to minutiae, like seating. For a giant event like this, the idea of chairing sounds daunting. But this year’s chairman, Christian Figurniak, is surprisingly calm about it.

Figurniak is one of three members of the department named as one of the *Suffolk Times’* People of the Year because of a daring water rescue that saved the lives of two teenagers from drowning in 2023. As long as the stakes aren’t life or death, Figurniak, who started as a junior firefighter and is now a lieutenant, is taking the role in stride. “The planning of the event doesn’t change much year to year, thanks to traditions and a lot of members who have been part of it for many years,” Figurniak says.

But despite his confidence, he admits being the chairman of the Cutchogue Fire Department Chicken Barbecue is a badge of honor. There’s a three-year committee consisting of two co-chairmen and