Algonquin Countryside with News of Lake in the Hills (IL)

Putting heart and soul into BBQ

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By ELIZABETH SCHIELE Contributor

Sweet Baby Ray himself is here to say his sauce is not only sweet and tangy, but it's got cling ability.

"Sweet Baby Ray's uses pineapple syrup to make a unique flavor and sweetness and the thickness has cling ability to the meat," said Dave Raymond, originator of the Sweet Baby Ray barbecue sauce sold at local grocers. That barbecue clingability enhances the flavor of almost every meat it's basted on, but that cling ability also is keeping his namesake rib joint hopping in Elk Grove Village after almost two years in business. Here, Raymond, along with partners Mike O'Brien and executive chef Paul Papadopoulos, sell 1,000 pounds of baby back ribs each week, all slow smoked for 12 hours making them pink, tender and meaty.

800 E. Higgins Road, Elk Grove Village. Open for lunch noon to 5 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays and 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays. Open for dinner 5 p.m. to 10 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays and 5 to 11 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays. On Saturdays and Sundays, breakfast is also served from 9:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. Call (847) 437-9555 or visit www.sbrbbq.com.

"I'm taking my heart and soul and everything I know about barbecue and putting it in a barbecue restaurant," Raymond said. "Our place has brought a southern and Cajun flair to Chicago."

That Cajun flair comes from chef Papadopoulos who spent seven years as the executive sous chef at Heaven on Seven, the popular downtown Chicago Cajun restaurant. Guests will experience a little bit of that spice in such menu items as the pan-seared, barbecue wild shrimp. Although Papadopoulos experiments with a variety of daily specials including smoked chicken or chopped brisket enchiladas and even Hawaiian lamb ribs, they're not always his biggest sellers.

"Ninety-percent of the people come here for barbecue," Papadopoulos said. The ribs and the pulled pork sandwiches are the most popular menu items. But guests will also discover delicious and tender, sliced beef brisket graced with the popular sauce and a fresh, tangy and perfectly prepared barbecue salmon served with a corn maque choux and creamy coleslaw.

For dessert, guests can experiment with mini samplers ranging from tart key lime pie to a crĀ me brulee. Prices range from \$7 to \$27 for both lunch and dinner.

The dining room is as casual as the food here, with a come-as-you-are southern hospitality, with ample seating inside and outside, plus a separate bar area.

Raymond has spent more than 25 years circling the country at barbecue competitions and he believes Chicago is at the top of the second tier of barbecue capitals in the United States. The top tier includes Memphis, North Carolina, Kansas City and Texas. Although he mentions that the debate continues, "Chicago and barbecue are deeply entrenched," just as Sweet Baby Ray, barbecue and ribs are in the northwest suburbs.