

Neighbor

01

Creator of famous barbecue sauce opens restaurant



Rochelle Corso
Bensenville,
Wood Dale

Dave Raymond believes it's the "sweet" in his Sweet Baby Ray's barbecue sauce that makes it so appealing to children and seniors.

And to make believers out of everyone else, Raymond has opened his first Sweet Baby Ray's Barbecue Restaurant in Wood Dale.

Raymond began the journey from pharmacy buyer to restaurateur 20 years ago when he entered the first Mike Royko Ribfest in 1985 on a dare. His brother Larry, a profes-

sional chef, was charged with creating the barbecue rub.

"My brother talked to the seven best people he knew in the restaurant business to get their input, added his own ideas, and formulated our sauce," Raymond said.

When Raymond took second place out of 700 in the cook-off, he knew he had a winning concept. By incorporating the following year, he made the recipe an official brand. Since then, Raymond and a small

staff set out to turn Sweet Baby Ray's into a household name.

And they have succeeded.

Today, the Sweet Baby Ray's barbecue sauce is third in market share nationally. By 2003, the company achieved 23 million in sales and Raymond was ready to sell. He planned to devote time to volunteer and charity work.

But like a good businessman, Raymond also decided to hedge his bets. A clause in his sales agreement left

the door open.

"I negotiated the right to open four barbecue restaurants with the name 'Sweet Baby Ray's.'"

After one year of retirement, Raymond planned a comeback. After scouring Wood Dale for a location as close to his house as possible (he lives one-half mile away from the restaurant), Raymond opened the first Sweet Baby Ray's Barbecue

See CORSO on PAGE 4

Continued from Page 1

Restaurant at 249 E. Irving Park Road last June.

A tour of the 36-seat space reveals Raymond's attention to every aspect of the business, from the décor to the menu.

Booths are hand-carved out of solid blocks of wood. The cherry red floor comes from a plantation in Louisiana. Food trays are galvanized tin, to imitate the décor of Chicago-style barbecue restaurants from the '50s and '60s.

Other accents depict Chicago landmarks. A display of sports memorabilia includes the last Cubs banner to hang in Candlestick Park, traded by the field crew for five free pork

sandwiches.

When it comes to the food, Raymond relies on three chefs, including Executive Chef Paul Papadopoulos, formerly of Heaven on Seven, now closed in Chicago.

"How many barbecue restaurants do you know that have an executive chef?" Raymond asked.

The barbecue flavor comes from a process involving a Southern Pride smoker and an

"How many barbecue restaurants do you know that have an executive chef?"

Dave Raymond

authentic Chicago barbecue pit, Raymond said. And, of course, from copious coatings of Sweet Baby Ray's sauce.

The restaurant features an eclectic menu, one Raymond believes will keep customers coming back.

Menu items include the expected, such as hand-pulled pork sandwiches and smoked beef brisket.

You will also find the unexpected: smoked shaved prime

rib with caramelized onion; corn macque choux (whole kernel cream corn simmered in heavy cream with ham); onion, garlic and Cajun spices.

And then there's the completely unexpected: The Duce, which is a grilled beef bologna topped with pulled pork, coleslaw and a money-back guarantee.

Twenty-five years of barbecue passion continues unabated at Sweet Baby Ray's.

"When I got my first house, I suddenly became this suburban grilling dude," Raymond said thoughtfully.

With his first restaurant now open in Wood Dale, and a second coming soon in Elk Grove Village, he still is.