

Lifestyle

The search for great barbecue ends in Wood Dale

"Wow! You're white!" For David Raymond, a.k.a. Sweet Baby Ray, that's the usual response when he introduces himself.

"People find it hard to believe that there's a white guy from Chicago who knows barbecue sauce and barbecuing so well," Raymond said.

One of the founders of the highly successful Sweet Baby Ray's Barbecue Sauce company, he has now opened Sweet Baby Ray's Barbecue Restaurant at 249 E. Irving Park Road in Wood Dale.

"Sweet Baby Ray's Barbecue Sauce is Chicago's No. 1 brand of barbecue sauce," he said. "We have a 42 percent share of the Chicago barbecue sauce market."

The sauce is served in more than 18,000 restaurants in the United States, sold in 20,000 grocery stores and is the third best-selling retail brand nationally. With numbers like that, it made sense for him to capitalize on the brand name he and his family built over 20 years by opening a restaurant.

"After I sold the sauce business in 2002, everyone kept asking me what I was going to do next," he said. "Since my niece, Monica Raymond, and nephew, Duce Raymond, are interested in the restaurant business, and I know barbecue sauce, it made sense to open a restaurant. Instead of just sitting on all this money, I wanted to do something for their future."

Sweet Baby Ray's restaurant grand opening party will be from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 8.

Everything from the menu — soups, salads, gumbo, pulled pork, beef brisket, green chili mac and cheese — will be sampled all day long! There also will be barbecue demos, live music, rib-eating contests, prize drawings, games, moon jumps and face painting for the kids.

Scheduled events include barbecue and smoked meats presented by Chef Duce Raymond and Sweet Baby Ray at 11:30 a.m.; kids' events beginning at noon; a catering-made-easy demo by Chef Michael Nykaza at 12:30 p.m.; a rib-eating contest for a \$100 restaurant gift certificate at 2 p.m.; barbecue and cooking tips with Chef Elton Cummings at 2:30 p.m.; and a performance by Brian Lupo & the Allstars starting at 3 p.m.

Sweet Baby Ray's surpasses the average barbecue joint with a cook line that includes three corporate chefs and an executive chef.

"Besides regular barbecue, we have unique sandwiches that you can't find anywhere else," Raymond said. "We're hoping that by sampling the entire menu, people will want to come in and get lunch or dinner."

Their selections are quite diverse with specialized gourmet-cooked, uniquely smoked barbecue meats and signature

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sides. From sandwiches like The Duce (grilled beef bologna sauced and topped with pulled pork coleslaw) to unique sides like a kicked-up creamed corn, you'll see why Raymond didn't want fries on the menu — too ordinary for all this extraordinary food.

Here's another surprise fact: he's a fellow Wooddalen!

"I love Wood Dale," he said. "I love the town. I love the people. I'm never going to move, so it made sense to open the restaurant here. We wanted to start with a small place so that we could develop a good concept and sound menu while surrounding ourselves with great people."

On June 28, Sweet Baby Ray's officially opened after nine months of renovating the building's entire interior and exterior. Just about everything was upgraded because of their equipment like a Southern Pride smoker and authentic Chicago barbecue pit.

So far business has been great. They were out the door on opening day with more than 674 customers. The first full week of business grossed more money than Raymond made his entire first year in the sauce business, and the first three months are on pace to top what he made in the first three years.

Lunch is by far their busiest time.

Dinner has been somewhat lacking in trade, so they have started offering daily specials — like smoked chicken wings for 50 cents, smoked prime rib for \$11.99 and smoked pork loin for \$8.49 — served from 4 to 8 p.m. Monday through Saturday and all day Sunday.

Primarily, the Wood Dale business is carryout and catering, but there's cozy seating for 36. Tables and handcrafted booths create a tight maze of dining, but it's so cute inside that you barely notice. Wood walls are scattered with down-home items like original Sweet Baby Ray's barbecue ads, Chicago baseball memorabilia, Raymond's own childhood photos, a painting of his wife, plus photos of the entire staff.

This is the first of what he hopes will be many Sweet Baby Ray's restaurants. The group is close to a deal in Elk Grove for a place that will give them 165 seats, plus another 80 to 100 seats on a patio. They hope to open it by May of next year.

Taste why their slogan is "It's very good from the Wood" during regular business hours: 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday through Saturday and 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Sunday. Or visit them online at www.sbrbbq.com to see their full menu and call in an order.

Border Bounding is a weekly column appearing on Thursdays. Ideas and items for the column can be sent to Lifestyle, Press Publications, 800 Roosevelt Road, Suite D107, Glen Ellyn, IL 60137; or e-mailed to hipychk73@yahoo.com.