

AGE OF THE Dinosaur

Odds say it should be extinct by now, but the downtown rib joint is only getting stronger after nine years

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It could be the mouth-watering smells that waft from the smokers outside, daring even the vegetarians passing by to ignore a craving for barbecue.

Or maybe it's the spectacle of the place, evident in just a cursory glance in the windmill near the door — a farm relic as out of place in downtown Rochester as the "genuine honky tonk rib joint" itself would seem to be.

Whatever Dinosaur Bar-B-Que's secret, it's powerful enough to lure as many as a 1,000 people on a busy day. Despite a near-total lack of parking. Despite a location across the street from a public library in which the business before it failed. Despite being located in downtown Rochester, where in the nine years Dinosaur has been open, at least 20 downtown eateries, including the venerable Edward's, have closed.

"It's just an absolute phenomenon," said Nick Castronova, vice president of the Rochester chapter of the New York Restaurant Association. "They did everything wrong and turned it into everything right. To call it unusual isn't really doing it justice. I don't want to use the word miracle, but I would have to say that, keeping in mind that the most important things to achieve success are: location, location, location. Obviously, they beat the odds."

Several studies, including a recent one of Columbus, Ohio, area restaurants, have found a closure rate of more than 50 percent in the first three to five years of a restaurant's opening.

"Most themed restaurants have a three-year shelf life," says Heidi Zimmer-Meyer, president of the Rochester Downtown Development Corp. "And they have exceeded that ... (and) continue to draw a huge crowd."

Dinosaur does so even on weekends, when the rest of downtown empties of people. In fact, the restaurant, which three years ago opened on Sundays, recently expanded those hours. Not even the wait for a table — two hours on a typical Saturday evening — deters its loyal patrons.

About the food

Dinosaur's outdoor smokers and its location, in a 102-year-old railway station that juts out over the Genesee River, makes the restaurant distinctive, even among other Dinosaur restaurants — the first Dinosaur Bar-B-Que, in an old tavern in Syracuse, and a third, in a former meat-packing plant in New York City.

Dinosaur owner John Stage, a plain-speaking, hard-working motorcycle enthusiast, contends there's no big secret to his success.

"I think we got a damn good product," he said.

It helps that barbecue has near-universal appeal, and so many iterations — defined, among other things, by region, cooking style, serving method and preferred side dishes — that, as Stage says, "there's enough to go around for everybody." Dinosaur, Stage says, is "not really" affected by the competition, which in Rochester includes such restaurants as Sticky Lips BBQ.

But Stage, for all his perfectionism, started simply.

"We hatched the idea for the Dinosaur Bar-B-Que in 1983 at the Harley Rendezvous, a massive motorcycle gathering near Albany," Stage writes in his book, *Dinosaur Barbeque: An American Roadhouse*. "A few cases of beer later, some rotgut grub in our bellies and absolutely nothing to lose, we decided to get into the business of feeding bikers."

When, upon sobering up the next day, the idea still seemed a good one, Stage and his friends pooled their \$1.98, devised a three-sandwich menu and "hit all the biker gigs up and down the East Coast." The name — which seems especially appropriate now, given Dinosaur Bar-B-Que's stature — was inspired by one partner's nickname, Dino, a Hank Williams Jr. country song called "Dinosaur," and the founders' vintage bikes.

In 1985, Stage began planning for a restaurant. He found the perfect place in Syracuse, beneath a motorcycle shop.

"It was beautiful," Stage writes, until "some old Southern guy" he met questioned his knowledge of barbeque.

That prompted him to make a pilgrimage south. Books on the subject being hard to come by, Stage familiarized himself with barbeque by eating a lot of it.

"I remember being blown away by the taste of smoke-infused meat," he writes. "By the time I headed back north, I knew what had to be done. ... We had to get into slow-smokin' meat in a hickory-wood-fired pit."

100 pounds a day

The smokers at Dinosaur are loaded every day at 6 a.m. (give or take depending on how cold it is). The brisket and pork need to cook 12 to 14 hours, says Jim Clancy, one of the managers.

Dinosaur smokes 100 pounds of food a day, plowing through an eight-foot cord of hickory a week. The restaurant has no freezers on the premises. Food is made fresh. And the simply outfitted kitchen — like the laid-back, eclectic dining area, with its hundreds of artifacts on the wall, ranging from road signs to boar heads — belies the tremendous amount of labor that goes into making it.

"There's constant prepping," Clancy says. The pace quickens, he adds, to accommodate the catering and to-go businesses.

Stage, 47, who lives in New York and is "married to the business," is constantly tinkering — with recipes, wood selection, smoking temperatures. The trimming process, spice rub and cooking time for the brisket alone has changed five times in a year, Clancy says.

"Our barbeque," he says, "has never been better than it is right now."

That, by the way, is what Clancy believes to be Dinosaur's secret: "I think the food quality is the first draw. Everything except the ketchup is homemade."

Party time

Dinosaur's casual vibe attracts people, too. A former night club, Stage refashioned it with old timber — "Barns gave their lives up for these restaurants," he says — and brought in live music six days a week. Neither

is the fun limited to the inside: The parking lot on warm summer nights looks like an all-ages party.

Such trappings make it look easy. Yet Stage and his current partners, Nancy and Larry Luckwaldt, have had their challenges, for example when a norovirus broke out in Syracuse, sickening hundreds of Dinosaur patrons and forcing the restaurant to close for two and a half days last December.

"It was definitely a struggle," Stage says. "We just sanitized everything, from the air ducts to you name it. We started like it was a brand-new restaurant."

Monroe County Health Department records show only 12 complaints have been lodged against the Rochester location since 1998, most having to do with illnesses whose causes could not be confirmed.

The restaurant, by all accounts, has earned its reputation, which grows ever more famous. It recently received mention in the touring musical, *Spamalot*, in which some lines are altered to add local flavor. Ed Robertson, the singer-guitarist for the Canadian band Bare Naked Ladies, riffed on it during a concert here last fall, in excited anticipation of his planned birthday dinner there. And airline workers have been said to frequent the place whenever their routes take them through Rochester.

"They know how to work the tourist and visitor market," says Greg Marshall, vice president of the Greater Rochester Visitor's Association. "If you were in there on a Tuesday night, you would see all kinds of convention delegates."

Even those who haven't set foot in a Dinosaur may know about it: Its sauce is sold in stores throughout the East Coast; and various other merchandise, from T-shirts to decals, also is available.

Dinosaur, said the restaurant association's Castronova, sets the bar.

"Here's an inspiration with regards to people who came up with a brand-new concept, and not only did they do it right, they continue to give us consistency," he says. "That's really the benchmark."