



OUT OF THE WAY EATS

by Bob McEowen

The Rusty Jug

Barbecue served like nowhere else

Don't mention your dinner plans to your doctor. You probably shouldn't tell your workout partner or diet buddy, either. They may not approve. There is little on the menu at The Rusty Jug Barbeque and Root Beer Saloon that passes for healthy eating.

In truth, this El Dorado Springs restaurant does serve salads and a low-carb plate, but that's not what people come here for. If you enter The Rusty Jug, be prepared to throw caution (and the diet) to the wind.

The Rusty Jug serves heaping portions of smoked meats with side dishes that are often sweet, fried or covered with cheese. In fact, owner Todd Leonard is rarely satisfied until he takes a dish to the next level of gluttonous delight.

"I just want to make it one more notch better, or worse, depending on how you want to look at it," Todd says.

Worse could only be in the eye of a calorie counter, though. For people who enjoy mouth-watering food, The Rusty Jug will challenge expectations of barbecue and how it's prepared.

Take for example, the signature deep-fried smoked ribs. Todd begins with his regularly prepared, slow-smoked baby-back ribs. Once they're done, he dips them in buttermilk, rolls them in flour and fries them. He tops them off with a peppery apple glaze.

"You get that sweet crunch and then a smoked meat flavor," he says. "You're getting it all in one whack."

Fried ribs are one of the most popular items at The Rusty Jug, a restaurant named in honor of the mineral water that once brought people to El Dorado Springs by the wagonload. Today, visitors are more likely to bypass the historic spring downtown and head straight to The Rusty Jug for a plate of barbecue and a frosty root beer.

Decorated to resemble an 1880s saloon, The Rusty Jug serves no alcohol. Instead, the elegant bar that dominates the dining room is stocked with a variety of root beers, including Todd's homemade brew, which a waitress uncorks at your tableside while you watch.

The real focus of The Rusty Jug, though, is meat — smoked brisket, baby-back ribs and pork shoulder. A lifelong barbecue aficionado, Todd struggled to master the craft. His first effort ended in disaster as he prepared a turkey breast that was so smoky his dog wouldn't eat it.

Determined to learn, Todd traveled to Kansas

City, where he became a certified barbecue judge. As he sampled competitors' offerings, he asked questions and took notes. Before long, the bank vice president was smoking up a storm and operating a catering business on the side.

In 1995, Todd and his wife, Michele, began selling barbecue on weekends from a trailer parked outside a local department store. Spurred by the enthusiastic response from customers, they finally opened The Rusty Jug restaurant in 2004.

"My approach is pretty simple," Todd says. "I use my homemade rub, and we smoke our briskets right around 15, 16 hours; 18 hours on pork

says, hardly containing laughter as he describes the popular appetizer."

If the rich entrées and generous portions don't satisfy you, The Rusty Jug serves a variety of cake-and-ice cream themed deserts served in root beer mugs, as well as build-your-own S'mores.

While over-the-top delights such as Piggy Fries and deep-fried ribs may not be the best choice for diners on a strict diet, they're all in good fun and aimed at an enjoyable experience, Todd says.

"You're not going to eat at my place every day," Todd says. "When you come out to eat, it ought to be special."

shoulders. It's a slow cook. I do it right."

The brisket at The Rusty Jug is moist and tender and prepared Texas-style, with a kick to the sauce. The pulled pork sandwich is served with a Carolina-style sauce steeped in vinegar and cayenne and topped with sweet and sour slaw.

In addition to the fried ribs, baby backs are available four ways. Customers may choose a Memphis-style dry rub, the Rusty Jug Original with a Kansas City-style sweet sauce, Apple Butter ribs or Georgia Plantation ribs, which have a distinctive citrus sauce with flavors of orange and peach.

The Rusty Jug also offers hand-cut aged steaks, grilled chicken and pork chops, as well as a tantalizing array of sandwiches, appetizers and side dishes. While the menu sounds conventional in concept, the execution is often anything but.

"I like things that are off the wall," Todd says. "I want you to eat things you're not going to eat anywhere else. I'm not afraid to try anything new, and I'm not afraid to try anything that's different."

Cheddar cheese and fried onion rings top a heaping mound of brisket to produce the Texas Melt sandwich. French fries or fresh fried potato chips are transformed into The Rusty Jugger when they're covered with smoked meat, cheese, barbecue sauce and sour cream. Todd's BLT could rightly be called a BBLT, as a layer of brisket is added to the bacon, lettuce and tomato. Likewise, brisket accompanies a grilled chicken breast on The Rusty Jug's Maverick dinner entrée.

While few of offerings match the deep-fried smoked ribs for defying modern dietary recommendations, the restaurant's Piggy Fries completely topples the food pyramid.

"We take a French fry that's been fried and then we roll it in batter and fry it again and put cheese and bacon on it," Todd



Michele and Todd Leonard display the delicious smoked meats that have made The Rusty Jug a favorite of southwest Missouri diners for five years. Not content to present the ordinary, Todd dreams up unique offerings such as deep-fried smoked ribs and homemade root beer.

The Rusty Jug

Specialties: Deep-fried smoked ribs, barbecue ribs, brisket and pulled pork. Steaks, chicken and pork chops also served.

Price: Sandwiches are \$6.99 to \$8.99, dinners from \$12.99 to \$22.99. Cash, checks, all major charge cards.

Details: Open Wednesday and Thursday, 11 a.m to 8 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 11 a.m to 9 p.m. Seats 86. No smoking. No alcohol sales.

Directions: Located at 1209 S. High St. in El Dorado Springs (one block north of Highway 54).

Contact: 417-876-4669 or www.rustyjug.com



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