

STORY AND PHOTOS BY RANDY MALLORY

Rib Run to Country Tavern

ALL ACROSS the Piney Woods of northeast Texas, when you crave smoked pork ribs, you make a beeline for the Country Tavern.

During the past 30 years, I had made countless rib runs from my Tyler home to the little eatery near Kilgore where meat falls easily from the bone. Recently, I had heard rumors of change at the barbecue Mecca, changes that made it less of a beer joint with food and more of a family restaurant with honky-tonk flair. As I open the front door of the Country Tavern, I aim to find out.

Hanging on the wall inside are framed photos I'd seen before—autographed pictures of famous patrons such as actors Larry Hagman and Robert Duval, country music star Toby Keith, and former President George H.W. Bush.

As expected, a half dozen young waitresses in tight blue jeans and polo shirts shuttle trays of steaming barbecue to 200 or so diners. A pert young greeter gives me a warm “Howdy” and shows me to my seat in one of the red vinyl booths lining two walls of the main room. At one end there’s the familiar bar, swivel stools, and pool table. At the opposite end, a jukebox still blares country tunes, though the music is digital, not from vintage vinyl. In the middle of the room candles glow, as always, from tables packed in elbow to elbow, leaving only a hit of a dance floor.

But something about the scene seems fresh and new—sort of like a historic photograph that’s been retouched.

Overhead, a vaulted red sheet-metal ceiling replaces the old leak-stained drop ceiling. Black central air-conditioning ducts pipe in cool, fresh air, and gone is the once common honky-tonk haze (smoking is allowed only at the bar). New lighting brightens

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the space. Off one corner there's a new 60-seat banquet room—complete with horseshoe-shaped bar—for private parties or overflow seating.

That's all well and good, but what about the food? What about the legendary Country Tavern ribs and brisket and that sweet spicy table sauce? My culinary angst subsides as I watch the boisterous crowd lick their fingers and voraciously gnaw ribs to the bone. They seem like succulence seekers on a pilgrimage to barbecue heaven.

Waitress Linda Stuart, who's worked here nearly 20 years, appears out of nowhere to take my order. Country Tavern once offered only pork ribs and beef brisket, accompanied by mustard-laced potato salad, dill pickles, a round of onion, and slices of white bread. Those platters remain the favorites by a long shot (\$13 for brisket and \$11-17 for ribs). But now you can also pick platters of smoked turkey, smokehouse sausage, or a mixed platter (\$13-16), with new sides of cole slaw, beans, or chips—not to mention homemade desserts (more about that later).

The order arrives—my standard hot ribs and cold beer—and my heart sings. It's déjà vu all over again. My tried-and-true Tavern technique starts with devouring one or two of the ribs dry without sauce. These loin back pork beauties have been basted with a secret cooking sauce, then slow-cooked over hickory smoke at 230 or so degrees for more than four hours. The smoky, spicy flavors fire up my taste buds like a light brightens a dark room.

The remaining ribs I slather liberally with the Tavern's signature sauce (you can buy it by the bottle), then I get down and dirty. Once the inevitable pile of picked-over bones reaches its apex, I transform a slice of white bread (the only time I eat the stuff) into a platter-cleaning device to sop up what's left of the drippings and sauce.

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Mercifully, waitress Linda shows up with a moist, warm cloth for clean up. She wonders if I'd like homemade peach or blackberry cobbler topped with Blue Bell vanilla ice cream (\$4). Because I raised my kids to believe it's illegal in Texas to eat cobbler without vanilla ice cream, my answer—despite a creeping sense of satiation—is an emphatic “Oh yeah! Gimme blackberry.”

This is my first visit to the Country Tavern since the untimely death several years ago of its beloved long-time proprietress, Lois Mason. Her grandson, Toby Pilgrim, is now at the helm, so I look him up for the real lowdown.

Toby tells me that Roger and Ivy Lee Sloan opened the original Country Tavern Café circa 1939 beside their liquor store, which still stands beside the eatery. Then and now, the property sits near several honky-tonks and liquor stores clustered at the county line with “dry” Smith County.

The original Country Tavern burned and was replaced with a similar structure in the early 1960s, shortly before Lois Mason became a waitress here. The feisty woman saved up her earnings and bought the place in 1972. By then, the Country Tavern had developed a following among barbecue fans.

Some came for more than barbecue. When Lois took over, there was still a mysterious door in the dingy men's bathroom that led to a hidden room (now taken in by the new banquet room) where locals played clandestine hands of poker.

One of the Country Tavern cooks was an African-American named Maxey Thomas Henry. During the days of segregation, the place was essentially two cafes with a common kitchen. Whites ate in the main room. Blacks came around back to a separate dining room, bar, and bathrooms. Many black patrons hung out by the open-

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air cooking pit with Henry, where he basted meat with a rag tied to the end of a broomstick.

Also hanging out at the pit was Lois' son, Garry Pilgrim, learning everything he could from Henry about cooking barbecue. Garry and his wife, Jeannie, perfected Country Tavern's secret seasonings and sauce. Garry died in 1992. When Lois died in 2003, Jeannie carried on the family tradition. When she died six months later, the job of carrying on the barbecue dynasty fell to third-generation Toby.

"We went through some tough times, and business declined. I wanted to save the place by offering a more family-friendly atmosphere," he tells me, standing beside the restaurant's high-efficiency indoor automated cooker. "The barbecue is as good today as it was when my dad cooked outside at the pit dressed in his overalls."

Patrons must agree. Business has doubled since Toby took over—now racking up weekly sales of 3,000 pounds of ribs, 1,000 pounds of brisket, and 450 pounds of sausage and turkey.

That kind of success allows Country Tavern regulars to carry on their own family traditions. I saunter over and join a jovial foursome knocking down some ribs and brisket. David Newman sits with his teenaged son, John David, and two of the son's friends, Evan Russell and John Denman, all of Dallas. "I've been coming here since I was a teenager," explains the 51-year-old dad. "My parents had a lake house near Henderson, and whenever we came from Dallas on the weekends, we'd stop at the Country Tavern for good barbecue." Likewise, the group is on its way for a weekend of fishing at that same lake house and now eating that same "good barbecue."

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As I waddle back to the car, I feel comforted that—at least when it comes to food and family at the Country Tavern—the old adage holds true: the more things change, the more they stay the same.

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COUNTRY TAVERN BARBECUE is at 1526 FM 2767 (TX 31 at FM 2767) five miles west of **Kilgore**. Hours: 11-9 M-Thu, 11-10 Fri-Sat. For reservations or more information, call 903/984-9954.

Resources:

--Toby Pilgrim, proprietor, 903/984-9954 or 903/522-0877 (cell)

--David Newman, patron, 972/488-1717