

barbecue ribs

BY LORRAINE EATON
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

Frankie's Place for Ribs, Fairfield Shopping Center

IF YOU'VE SPENT a spell in South Hampton Roads, and if you care a whit about barbecue ribs, then you likely consider Frankie a friend.

There were once four Frankie's Place for Ribs to choose from. Now two independently run eateries share the same name.

Frankie's Place for Ribs at Fairfield Shopping Center garnered the most reader nominations and it has been a rib hangout for nearly two decades. Their specialty: baby backs — hickory smoked, marinated in a top-secret barbecue sauce, and finished on a charcoal grill.

What a way to begin an evening of rib rapture.

Frankie's ribs entered the room of our blind taste test before they physically arrived.

"I smell spiciness and flavor right off the bat," said Amy, who rightly suspected that these ribs were from her favorite rib joint.

Thick avenues of meat separated the bones and the baby backs proudly bore the mark of the grill.

Most appearance/aroma scores came in just above average. But Edward, one of our toughest scoring judges of all time, awarded Frankie's the lowest possible score in this category because he felt the smoke smell too fleeting.

In the all-important meat category, Frankie's fared far better, even with Edward.

"The texture is great," he said, awarding a score slightly above average. "I don't have to pull to get to the meat."

Diane, seated just two seats down, awarded a perfect score in the meat category. (Overall, Frankie's was her favorite of the night.) And Amy's score was just a point behind Diane's.

"This is so tender, the meat is tangy and spicy and just falls off the bone," Amy said.

In fact, Frankie's was among the spiciest ribs to pass over the testers' palates.

The smoke flavor was mild, a plus with this panel, which tended toward a tamer smoke taste.

"Mild smokiness; not too overpowering," said Amy, who eventually put Frankie's in a tie for first place.

The sauce is where this rib shone brightest, outscoring all others in this category. While spicy, testers said that it didn't overpower the pork.

At \$13.50 for a queen-sized dinner - including homemade corn bread and choice of two sides - three of five testers thought Frankie's an above average deal.

In the end, Frankie's was the top pick of two testers, and the least favorite of one, leaving it with a solid score of 64.

Could it be beaten?

Buffalo Beach

Next up: Buffalo Beach, the sports bar/restaurant in Hilltop Plaza in Virginia Beach that took top honors in last year's chicken wing contest.

Turns out, the place has a herd of rib regulars and plenty called to rave about the fare. Ribs here are offered with a variety of barbecue sauces or dry-rubbed with ragin' Cajun or Jamaican jerk seasonings.

We tested barbecued racks, which immediately stood out when presented at the testing table. These were the only St. Louis-style ribs in a field of baby backs.

Baby back ribs come from the top of the pig's ribs, the part nearest the backbone. St. Louis style ribs come from the lower end of the ribs closer to the belly. St. Louis ribs are larger and not as lean as baby backs.

The Buffalo Beach ribs were indeed larger than the others, and also a lighter hue. The aroma was spice and smoke that had Edward ready to go caveman on them.

"The ribs are too light of color . . . but there's a good smell of hickory," he said.

All of the testers awarded above-average scores, allowing Frankie's to pull ahead in the appearance/aroma category.

Now, certified barbecue rib judges (yes, there are such people) are trained to evaluate ribs, in part, by how much effort it takes to bite the meat off the bone. According to the Kansas City Barbecue Society, perfectly cooked ribs require a



The winning ribs served up at Smoked from Above in Virginia Beach are first coated in a rub of co-owner Lee Holland's creation.

THE NOMINEES

HERE'S THE LIST of restaurants nominated for having the best ribs. If you're a real ribs fan, try them all and check them off as you go.

MULTIPLE LOCATIONS

- Smokey Bones Barbecue & Grill
- Yukon Steak Co.

CHESAPEAKE

- AJ Gators Sports Bar & Grill
- Great Bridge BBQ
- Lillian's Seafood Restaurant
- Ms. Marian's Restaurant

NORFOLK

- Bodega
- Harry's Famous Barbecue
- Logan's Roadhouse
- Megallons Gourmet Barbecue
- San Antonio Sams, A Texas Grill

SUFFOLK

- Vintage Tavern



CHARLIE MEADS/THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT FILE
Smokey Bones Barbecue & Grill was one of the restaurants receiving nominations from rib fanciers in Hampton Roads.

VIRGINIA BEACH

- Beale Street Restaurant
- Buffalo Beach

- Fire & Vine Woodfire Cuisine
- Frankie's Place for Ribs, Fairfield
- Frankie's Place for Ribs, Virginia Beach Boulevard
- Green Parrot Grille
- Icehouse Restaurant
- The Imperial Palace
- Jake's Smokehouse Bar-B-Que
- Malbon's BBQ & Catering
- Smoked From Above BBQ
- Smokehouse & Cooler

ELSEWHERE

- Food For Thought, Williamsburg
- Pierce's Pitt Bar-B-Que, Williamsburg

bit of effort, a bit of a tug from the teeth, to free the meat from the bone.

"The meat is well-cooked," said Tom, whose palate is certified to test ribs by the Kansas City outfit, which hosts competitions across the country. "It pulls from the bone properly."

His well above-average score in the meat category was tempered by others who preferred that it fall off the bone.

"These are very tender and juicy ribs," Amy said, "but the meat doesn't come off easily."

"The flavor of the rib is wonderful," Edward said. "But . . . I had to pull too much for the meat."

Other testers obviously preferred the leaner baby back ribs, and held back points for the presence of fat.

All but one of the testers liked the smoke taste. Buffalo Beach uses "A good smoke flavor on these ribs," said Tom, who rated this rib No. 1 overall.

"I love it," Edward said, awarding it a near perfect score in this category. In the smoke category, Buffalo Beach would eventually tie with the No. 1 rib.

The mild, slightly sweet barbecue sauce was another hit. Testers said that it complemented, rather than overwhelmed, the taste of the meat. In fact, the sauce outscored the No. 1 rib in this category.

At Buffalo Beach, you can get a half-rack "basket" for \$9.99, or a full dinner for \$17.99. Those prices earned the eatery average to above-average marks in this category from all but one judge.

The overall score of 60 was close, but not enough to top Frankie's.

Bill Mitchell's Home-Cooked BBQ Ribs

When we sent out the APB calling for favorite rib places, a whole suburbia of you nominated your own backyard. So many locals have been perfecting rib recipes on home barbecues that we felt compelled to invite one over.

Bill Mitchell really really wanted to be a tester, but when we read his dossier, we wanted him to smoke up a few racks for our panel. The Virginia Beach resident has been cook-

ing ribs since 1967. His 40 years of experience, combined with the picture of him proudly standing by his Klose smoker that he had custom built and shipped to him from Texas, confirmed his passion.

Without hesitation, he accepted the challenge.

His racks arrived dark and

glistening with sauce, with grill marks here and there and distinctive smoky smell.

Testers were impressed, and awarded big scores across

the board, the best so far.

"I could not wait to bite into them," Walter said.

Scores for the slightly sweet sauce were lower, but Mitchell gained ground in the meat category. His won accolades for being juicy with an excellent texture, but the intensity of the smoke absorbed by the meat during cooking had the panel divided.

"Nice smoke aroma," Edward said. "I can taste a mix of different woods, and I love it." Edward, our toughest judge in terms of points awarded, rated these ribs No. 1.

"These ribs have a great smoke flavor," Tom said.

And on the other side, "It's all I can taste," Amy lamented.

The meat took some effort to free, pleasing our Kansas City judge, but not others.

"It stayed attached," Diane said. "It didn't allow you to clean the bones. That's just not right."

In the value category, the ribs eked ahead of Frankie's and Buffalo Beach, and earned what may be the ultimate compliment. "They are almost as good as my own," Walter confessed.

"These ribs," Edward said, "are authentic barbecue. They can compete with some of the great barbecue teams."

With a final score of 66, our home cook squeaked past the competition so far. But could he keep his lead?

Smoked From Above BBQ

Unless you travel Baxter Road, and unless you crane

the lowest score possible. Tom noted smoke, but not enough. The others applauded the restrained smokiness that they said didn't overwhelm the ribs.

"It's not overpowering," Amy said.

"Love it!" said Walter, who rated these ribs higher than the others tasted so far.

A full-rack with two sides and hush puppies is \$11.95. (Diners can also order half- or third- racks of ribs.) Smoked from Above BBQ eclipsed all others in the value category.

"I can't wait to find out who made them," Walter said.

With a final score of 67, Smoked From Above's ribs topped Buffalo Beach, Frankie's and Bill Mitchell's.

Did we have a winner?

757 Fire & Vine

Usually, a restaurant has to be around for a while to garner enough reader nominations to make our final four. But 757 Fire & Vine in the Hilltop East Shopping Center in Virginia Beach, opened in February, already has a plenty of people raving about the ribs.

The restaurant specializes in "woodfire cuisine" and "new world wines." We tested the Mahogany Baby Back Ribs.

Executive chef Marc Taylor explained that the ribs are first rubbed with a blend of spices and brown sugar and left to season for 72 hours. Then, they are washed and cooked for 16 hours in a special moist heat smoker. Next, they are lacquered in a shiraz barbecue sauce reduction and passed over a wood-fired grill.

The resulting smoky aroma — a bolder presence than in any of the others — instantly won the attention of the testers . . . who once again were polarized. Tom and Walter were tantalized by the rich, smoky smell. But to the others, the smoke was too prevalent.

In the meat category, testers praised the way the pork fell from the bone.

But Walter and Tom were the only ones to champion these ribs in the smoke category. During the last step in the cooking process, the grill is fired with pear, cherry and mesquite wood. Woods are selected to impart different flavors. The pear and cherry leave a slight sweetness; the mesquite tanginess.

Walter loved the results. "A good to great smoke taste."

"Too much smoke," Ed countered.

The trend continued in the sauce category with Walter and Tom praising the ribs, and the others offering a lukewarm response.

"The sauce sticks to the fingers," Diane said, "but the ribs to lick 'em clean is not there."

Fire & Vine is a more upscale restaurant than the others in this taste test. A rib dinner runs \$24, and includes two family-style sides and the antipasto table.

Most testers awarded below-average scores for value. But Walter, who rated these ribs No. 1, believes they are well worth the price and drive.

In the end, testers found something to squeal about in all of the entries. Each rack earned a No. 1 rating from at least one judge, something that has never happened in any of our many taste tests. So bib up and take your pick.

■ Reach Lorraine Eaton at (757) 446-2697 or lorraine.eaton@pilotonline.com

Bill Mitchell's Home-Cooked BBQ Ribs

Baby back ribs or St. Louis cut ribs

Hickory wood chunks

Rub:

- 2 tablespoons paprika
- 1 tablespoon celery salt
- 2 tablespoons kosher salt
- ½ teaspoon chili powder
- 1 tablespoon light brown sugar
- 1 teaspoon black pepper
- 2 tablespoons granulated garlic
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 2 tablespoons powdered onion
- ½ teaspoon cayenne pepper

Ribs

■ All ribs have a membrane, sometimes called "silver skin," on the underside. This membrane should be removed as it acts a barrier to smoke or other flavors that will be added. To remove you simply take the tine of a fork and run it under the membrane until you can pull the entire skin loose from the rib. This sometimes takes several attempts but you often get lucky and it comes off in one whole piece. Rinse the ribs slightly with running water and pat them dry with a paper towel.

Rub:

■ Combine the ingredients in an empty spice rack container and sprinkle the ribs lightly on both sides. Then rub the mixture into the meat. This can be done minutes before cooking (or hours before as long as the ribs are placed in the refrigerator). Feel free to play round with the suggested spice amounts. In place of a rib rub a light sprinkling of kosher salt will also produce excellent results.

■ **Cooking the ribs:** Bill uses a smoker/grill, LP gas and maintains a cooking temperature of 205 to 210 degrees F.

■ After the smoker has warmed up place the ribs on the grates in the cooking chamber close to the firebox where they spend the next 4-5 hours. Use hickory wood chunks and replace as needed. Turn ribs over and around about every hour. The last hour baste them on both sides (once) with a barbecue sauce (anything you like), wait 30 minutes and turn them. After another 30 minutes they are ready to be served or wrapped in foil for later.

■ **Note:** As an alternative, Bill uses a gas Weber grill and a rib rack that will hold ribs upright and horizontally in the Weber. He prepares the ribs the same way and places them in the Weber with the temperature set on MOM (medium-off-medium). The lid is closed and the ribs cook for 60-80 minutes. This method is a lot less trouble and the ribs are quite good, he says.

■ If you prefer a glaze, baste the ribs with a sauce of your choice when there is about 20 minutes left and then close the lid for the remaining time.

Recipe and suggestions from Bill Mitchell of Virginia Beach.

NOTES:



THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT FILE

NEXT UP: SOFT-SHELL CRABS

The first full moon of May is full of meaning in these parts — it heralds the start of soft-shelled crab season.

We're on a mission to find the best soft-shells in South Hampton Roads.

To nominate an eatery, tell us the name of the place and the city where it is located.

One vote per person — and we reserve the right to exclude any restaurant that has offered deals to customers who vote.

To be a tester, make a pitch about why you should be selected, and make it good. Be sure to include your name, age and your city of residence.

Nominations and/or applications can be left at our Taste Test line at (757) 446-2334, or e-mail us at tastetest@pilotonline.com.

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