



Sugar Ray's BBQ

by Rich Belmont

You can say you are barbecuing when you are really grilling on your gas grill. To us Foodies, however, true BBQ has to be smoked. And the definition of smoking is a method of cooking involving the slow roasting of meats (also seafood and vegetables) in a closed oven or open air in the presence of smoke created by the combustion of hardwoods. Heat is transferred by convection at low temperatures.

Anyone can buy a smoker and cook real BBQ, right? Well, anyone who has tried it, including me, knows smoking BBQ requires talent, skill, a lot of hard work and a source for good wood.

It also takes perseverance, patience, commitment and dedication. The late Donna Ginter recognized all of those qualities in Sugar Ray Sanders when she invited him to set up a stand at her Dubuquefest more than twenty years ago.



Sugar Ray (Pictured above with his wife, Cynthia) grew up on the south side of Chicago where he learned to cook by helping his grandmother. He moved to Dubuque in 1975 to attend the University of Dubuque. Four years later he was awarded a degree in Safety Education Sociology. Right after graduation Sugar Ray embarked on a thirty two year career at John Deere Dubuqueworks retiring in 2011.

When he was in college, though, Sugar Ray discovered his true passion was cooking. He enjoyed making Sunday dinners for friends and roommates.

Seventeen years ago he seized the opportunity to turn his hobby of smoking BBQ into a part-time business. He began selling it in the bar at the Dubuque Sports Complex. Now Sugar Ray's BBQ restaurant was up and running: first near the corner of 12th and Iowa Streets in Dubuque, then on Main Street, then at Kennedy Mall Food Court. By now he was inundated with requests to do catering for private parties, corporate events and festivals. So he closed the retail operation and did catering for two years until his retirement from John Deere.

Lucky for us, Sugar Ray is not one to remain idle. So as soon as the retirement party was over he was right back at his smoker now permanently residing at 1106 University Avenue in Dubuque.

Sugar Ray's BBQ is owned by Sugar Ray who is the Chef and Master Smoker and his wife Cynthia who is, according to him, the brains of the operation.



While Cynthia takes care of the business, Sugar Ray is tending his smokers. He has a trailer mounted unit outside and two inside he only fires up when it is too cold to be outdoors. Smoking is about controlling smoke and heat and he is an expert at



maintaining both. He uses charcoal for heat and hickory and apple wood for flavor. He continually monitors the cooking environment to insure the meats are roasted slowly and evenly at a constant 200° to 225° F. Beef brisket and pork butt are smoked for 8 to 12 hours, ribs for 4 and a half and chicken for 3 and a half hours.

Sugar Ray's BBQ is distinctive because he has taken years to perfect his BBQ Rub recipe from a whole list of secret ingredients. This rub works so well at retaining moisture I recommend you try his BBQ without sauce or ask for the sauce on the side. Even though there are two sauces (mild or hot) that are homemade with special ingredients, the meat just doesn't need them!



In my opinion the Pork Ribs are the standout signature meal. Only Baby Back Ribs are cooked here. They are from the loin of the hog where pork chops come from and are smaller, less fatty and way tenderer than traditional less expensive spareribs. Baby Backs are one of the most expensive cuts of meat from the hog because of high demand.

Sugar Ray's BBQ
1106 University Ave., Dubuque, IA 52001
563-583-9590 www.SugarRaysBBQ.com
HOURS: Mon - Sat: 11:30 am - 8:30 p.m., Sun: Closed
DINING STYLE: Come as you are **NOISE LEVEL:** Quiet
RECOMMENDATIONS: BBQ Pulled Pork, Chicken or Beef Brisket, Pork Ribs, Beef Ribs, Pork Rib Tips & Hot Link Combo, Whole Wings, Whole Catfish, Coleslaw, Potato Salad, Baked Beans, Sweet Potato Pie, Chocolate Cake, Caramel Cake
LIQUOR SERVICE: None **PRICE RANGE:** \$4.50 - \$13.50
PAY OPTIONS: Cash, Debit, All Major Credit Cards, No Checks
KIDS POLICY: No kids menu, High Chair & Booster
CATERING: Yes **TAKE OUT:** Yes **DELIVERY:** Yes
RESERVATIONS: No **PARKING:** On Street



The sandwiches are all delicious. The Pulled Pork Sandwich (above) is piled high with perfectly seasoned pork. The Beef Brisket Sandwich is tender and the BBQ Chicken Sandwich (above, right) contains pulled chicken, not sliced. My favorite lunch is the spicy Hot Link Pork Sausage packed with flavor and just a little heat.



The Whole Wings, Buffalo Hot Wings (above), Farm Raised Catfish (below) and Cod are all hand coated with a homemade batter containing enticing secret seasonings. This batter imparts an unusual flavor and it is extra crispy.



Many of the sides are homemade as well. The Macaroni and Cheese is prepared with a 3-blend cheese of Extra Sharp Cheddar, Provolone and Mozzarella. The Potato Salad, Coleslaw and Baked Beans are all made from Sugar Ray's own recipes. The Baked Beans, for example, have over 8 ingredients. There are two kinds of French Fries: straight cut and homemade sliced with the skins on.

The Chili contains 4 different meats, beans, jalapeño and chili seasoning. It was the 1st Place CASI Division 2011 award winner at the Tri-States Largest Chili Cook-Off. CASI, by the way, stands for Chili Appreciation Society International. And speaking of awards, this little restaurant has managed to capture the Dubuque Hospice Best Fest Best of the Tri-States for Ribs award six times. They have also won at least seven trophies for Best Original Wing Sauce or Most Unique Wing Sauce from Wingfest, the Tri-States Annual Chicken Wing Contest.

Sugar Ray's BBQ is a counter service restaurant. But it is mostly a take-out establishment since it only has 3 tables and 3 chairs at a window counter with a total seating capacity for about 20 people.

Fried fish and chicken are cooked to order. So there is wait time of 15 to 20 minutes for most orders. Of course, you can avoid the wait by calling in before your arrival.

When you are placing your order remember to include dessert! There are three homemade sweets: Chocolate Cake, Sweet Potato Pie, and a decadent three layer Caramel Cake. At least one and usually two of these luscious delights are available every day.



Sugar Ray's BBQ can be purchased at many of the area's finest festivals. They will end this summer's season at the Island Fest 2013 BBQ Bash at mystique Casino Friday night, Sept 13 7-9p.m., and Saturday, Sept. 14th, 11 a.m. to 8 p.m.