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Hot off the Grill: Southern Saratoga County BBQ Reviews

By Amy E. Tucker

Nothing says summer like hot, tangy barbeque and fruity, frozen bar drinks. So, I felt compelled to make the rounds, sample the fare and review some of Southern Saratoga County's best barbecue joints to let you in on the skinny. I separated my dining into two groups: the family-owned-and-run barbecue joints who were primarily beer and wine-friendly and the local chains where I sampled their best frozen concoctions.

Family-Owned-and-Run:



Outside Giffy's

Smack dab in the center of Clifton Park is [Giffy's Bar-B-Q](#) at 1739 Route 9. The locally grown, family run business specializes in volume catering for 2,000+ and won the best chicken category at the "Live! with Regis and Kelly" 2009 Ultimate Hometown Grill Off in June. Named Giffy's after the "Gifford" family name, the restaurant features an original, sweet red sauce for their pork, beef and

ribs and their own version of the Cornell vinegar chicken barbecue sauce.

The "Cornell Recipe" was developed and made famous at Cornell University years ago and has become the standard for good chicken barbecue sauce throughout upstate New York.

The chicken is grilled for 2-3 hours over a 20' open charcoal pit and basted regularly with the apple vinegar barbecue sauce for a light vinegar taste. The ribs, pork and beef are steamed for tenderness, then finished off over the charcoal pit and basted with their signature red sauce.

"We don't use a dry rub," explained Vice President Bryah Gifford. "But, we have a special seasoning salt with paprika, onion, garlic, chili pepper and other flavorings."

My personal favorite was the **pulled beef for its tenderness and flavor**, and of course, their **award-winning chicken!** Visit their all-you-can-eat-lunch-buffet Tuesday through Sunday from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. where \$6.99 gets you all the pulled chicken or pork you can consume.



VP Bryah Gifford rotating chicken on the charcoal pit

Further south, I checked out **Otis & Oliver's** at 979 Troy-Schenectady Road, Latham, inside Cocca's Inn & Suites. Highly recommended by a friend, this little known barbecue joint did not disappoint. Their **Danish baby-back ribs** are dry-rubbed and slow roasted for six hours, then finished off with their signature apple-infused barbecue sauce. Sweet, tender and meaty, they literally fell off the bone-delectable!

If you like a bite to your barbecue, their signature jalapeno sauce comes standard with the slow-roasted shoulder pulled pork. With just enough kick to make you whet your whistle, even those with a sensitive palate-like me-will enjoy it as an alternative. Otis & Oliver's also offers barbecue chicken and an 8 oz. certified Angus barbecue burger and combo platters of ribs, seafood, chicken or pork.

Otis & Oliver's features inside or patio seating, a full-service bar and a friendly atmosphere decorated with pink pigs. Owner Don Wade, can be found cooking in the kitchen. His wife, Erin, named the restaurant after two pot-bellied pigs she once saw at the NYC Zoo.



COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT

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H.O.P.E.

Learn more about Homes for Orphaned Pets Exist, an organization that provides services to the Saratoga County Animal Shelter and pet foster homes.



LOCAL EVENTS

Country Fair - Friday

Fri, Sep 11, 2009

Country Fair - Saturday

Sat, Sep 12, 2009

Apple Fest 2009 at Bidwell Orchards

Sat, Sep 19, 2009 until Sun, Sep 20, 2009

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Sun, Sep 20, 2009

[2009] Troy Night Out - Downtown Troy

Fri, Sep 25, 2009

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If you're heading **north for track season**, be sure to visit **PJ's Bar-B-Q**, exit 13N of the Northway on Route 9, South Broadway. Celebrating their 26th year, PJs is another family owned restaurant started by former teachers PJ and Carolyn Wade and their two children, John and Jady.

Everything about PJs is inviting, from the food, ambiance and personnel to the 50s décor in their dining area and the baby-boomers trivia wall. They have a dog-friendly area so guests can bring fido

and they'll even hook him up with his own PJs Frisbee and doggie bag! Tuesdays feature Classic Car Night and Thursdays is Bike Night, and if you're a Buffalo Bills fan, there are nearly a dozen parking spaces up front reserved especially for you! (As a Carolina Panthers fan, I voluntarily parked across the street.)

But, let me tell you about the food!!!! PJs has **two, 20' firebrick charcoal pits** where the chicken and ribs are smoked to perfection. The **pork shoulders are smoked for 12 hours** overnight using hickory wood and the **Texas Smoked Beef Brisket** is slow-cooked for 14 hours using mesquite wood. In addition to the Mustard Sauce, PJs offers Original Hickory Sauce, Texas Hot Sauce, Kansas City Sweet Sauce and their own variation of the Cornell vinegar sauce.



PJ Wade turning/basting food over the charcoal pits

Everything was fabulous and my surprise favorite was the sausage dipped in their Carolina Mustard Sauce. The beef brisket was tender and delicious and the Hickory sauce with its tangy taste and slight bite worked with everything.



PJs Welcome Sign

Their three-page menu features all the down-home sides you could possibly crave from sweet potato casserole and hush puppies, to South Western corn and collard greens. For dessert, sink your teeth into pies, cobblers, bread pudding or old-fashioned custard ice cream. And, don't forget to try their signature loganberry fruit drink: a non-carbonated cross between blackberries and red raspberries.

PJs is open 150 straight days from mid-April to mid-September annually and serves beer and wine in the indoor dining area only. The Davis family enjoys the off season traveling the country sampling barbecue and comparing recipes with other restaurateurs.

Local Chain Restaurants:

Unlike the mom-and-pop barbecue joints, the chains don't have smokers and charcoal pits. But, they do offer a tasty variety of barbecue options and wonderful frozen drinks.

I popped in on **T.G.I. Friday's**, Southside Drive next to Border's in Clifton Park, on Opening Day of the Track. The t-storms sent racers home early and the restaurant was already jam-packed at 5 p.m., but that didn't deter the service and hospitality one bit as the food and spirits kept flowing en force. Friday's features two great barbecue sauces: their original Jack Daniel's® glaze and the Jack™ Championship BBQ sauce-available only at Friday's- from Chad Hayden, Grand Champion of the Jack Daniel's® World Championship Invitational Barbecue™.

The **Jack Daniels® Sampler** included baby back pork ribs, Sesame Jack Chicken and golden-fried shrimp. The ribs were tender and tangy and were a hit along with the Sesame Jack Chicken, coated with Japanese panko breadcrumbs. The Cajun-spiced fried shrimp stood alone, so I avoided the extra JD sauce for dipping and enjoyed the original spicy goodness.



TGI Friday's Ribs & Shrimp



Jack Championship Sliders at TGI Friday's

Next off the grill were menu items drenched in the Jack™ Championship BBQ sauce. My favorite as a meal or shared appetizer was the **JK Championship Sliders** featuring four all-beef patties covered in shredded cheddar and bacon. These juicy burgers rivaled the original White Castle and were attractively garnished with a skewered cherry tomato and two pickles on top.

The **BBQ Bacon-Wrapped Shrimp** featured two grill-fired skewers of shrimp over garlic toast. Again, the basting with the Jack™ Championship sauce provided the perfect amount of flavor and I skipped the dipping sauce. The baby-back ribs were sweet and tender with a slightly spicy kick from the dry rub prior to cooking.

On the frozen concoction side, Friday's is serving up a new **Blackberry Margarita Shaker** featuring Sauza Gold® tequila and Dole® blackberries. Shaken, not stirred, I found the blackberry taste to be a bit on the mild side and wished I could get at the fresh blackberries floating inside the shaker! The **Mai Tai** on the other hand, was tropical bliss with Captain Morgan®, pineapple and peach juices and a slice of fresh pineapple on the glass rim. Heaven in a glass! And, I had to taste the **Ultimate Pomegranate Rita** with the signature sweet and tart of the fruit combined with Sauza Gold® tequila and orange liquor and served up in a large, festive glass with a skewered lime and orange draped across the rim.



TGI Friday's Mai Tai

For the best in gourmet burgers, I headed over to **Red Robin**, 1 Halfmoon Crossing in Clifton Park to see what barbecue options they were serving up. General Manager Joe Rice took to the grill and whipped me up a **Whiskey River® BBQ Burger** in the chain's own signature barbecue sauce. Grilled to perfection, the juicy burger comes lasso'd together with cheddar cheese, lettuce, tomatoes and mayo which combine and melt nicely with the sweet, flavorful barbecue sauce. It's partner in crime is the **Whiskey River® BBQ Chicken Burger** featuring a charbroiled chicken breast.

My two favorites, however, were the **Honky Tonk BBQ Pork Burger** and the **Whiskey River® BBQ Chicken Wrap**. The barbecue pulled pork marinates in the Whiskey River® BBQ sauce for a slightly stronger, almost tangy flavor that rocked! Hearty portions are served on a sesame seed bun with banana peppers and yellow onion and come with a side of coleslaw and garlic parmesan steak fries.

The **Whiskey River® BBQ Chicken Wrap** provides a healthy alternative to the menu options and works for a light dinner or lunch item as well. Served cold, and wrapped in a spinach tortilla with cheddar cheese, lettuce and a touch of ranch, the Whiskey River® sauce once again combines for a wonderful flavor that complements the chicken perfectly. On the side comes fresh melon and bottomless steak fries cooked in 100% cholesterol-free vegetable oil with zero trans fat per serving.

Sliding over to the bar, Holly mixed me up a myriad of margaritas to tantalize my tastebuds. New for the summer is **Red Robin's frozen Raspberry Margarita** with Sauza Gold® tequila, Cointreau premium orange liquor, raspberry puree and sweet 'n sour. I love raspberry.... Enough said? Their **One Great Margarita** comes in every flavor you can imagine including peach, mango, strawberry and banana. The peach was a little weak in my opinion, but the banana was delicious! Made with Sauza Gold® tequila, you can have them served up on the rocks or frozen.

And, of course, I had to try the **Ultimate Margarita** with 1800™ Reposado®, 100% Blue Agave tequila combined with Grand Marnier® on the rocks with a salted rim. Tax!?!?!?

Shane's Rib Shack, New York's only barbecue chain, was so busy with catering that I was unable to schedule a taste test. Located at 7 Southside Drive, this Georgia-based chain features baby-back ribs, pulled pork, beef brisket, barbecue chicken and even wings and chicken tenders with a combination buffalo-barbecue style sauce. Their southern-style sides include collard greens and fried okra as well as baked beans, mac-n-cheese and Brunswick stew. They serve wine in addition to bottled and draft domestic beer and imports. And, did I mention, they cater? They even offer gluten-free options.

If you've read this far, you obviously love barbecue! So, I thought I'd let you in on a little secret... Rumors have been flying that **Dinosaur BBQ**, famous in NYC and western New York is coming to the area. I **caught up with owner John Stage who confirmed that they're hoping to open in Troy in spring 2010**. In the meantime, you can always visit www.dinosaurbarbque.com and choose their airmail option.

Happy eating!

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Mailing Address: 9 Stonehurst Drive, Queensbury, NY 12804