

# Burge's: Arkansas' home for smoked turkeys, hams and more

BY KAT ROBINSON

It's November and that means the holiday season with all of its hustling and bustling will soon be upon us. At Burge's Hickory Smoked Turkeys and Hams, the bustle is already in full swing.

"We'll ship out, just in November and December, 16,000 to 20,000 packages, in what really comes down to about 12 shipping days," owner Jeff Voyles said in a recent interview at Burge's Little Rock location. "We spend the year building up our capacity and product, and send most of it out in a very short window. Ninety percent of our mail order business happens in those two months."

It's a far cry from the backyard barbecue of Alden Burge, who moved with his family to the southwest Arkansas town of Lewisville in 1953 from Shreveport, La. His day job was at the nearby oil fields, but his true calling was entertaining family and friends with his backyard barbecues.

The food was so good that fellow



The original Burge's in Lewisville.

co-workers and neighbors asked him to start barbecuing for them and he did, eventually even making up smoked chickens, beans and coleslaw to sell at high school football games each fall. Some nine years later, Burge was offered the chance to buy a dairy bar at the intersection of Arkansas 82 and Arkansas 29 in Lewisville. It seemed a prime opportunity for his family, so he and his wife and their three kids jumped in to create a family-run

barbecue joint. It caught on quickly, fueled by the great wonders of smoking meats Burge had refined and paired with a magnificent round of burgers, ice cream desserts and family traditions. The place became well known for its smoked hams and turkeys — which some folks passing

through would buy to take with them — and for smoked goat and peppermint ice cream on Independence Day.

In 1974, the Burge family decided to open a second location in the capital city. Located on R Street in the Heights, with a few tables and a kitchen, the Burge family business thrived, later expanding to space next door. Alden's son, Jack, eventually took over what had become a local institution, and, in



Burge's sells about 12,000 whole smoked turkeys a year.

## the eating essentials

### BURGE'S HICKORY SMOKED TURKEYS & HAMS

**Lewisville:** 6th and Spruce  
(870) 921-4292  
10:00 a.m. - 8:00 p.m. 7 Days a Week

**Little Rock:** 5620 R Street  
(501) 666-1660  
10:00 a.m. - 6:00 p.m. Monday - Friday  
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Closed on Sunday

Toll Free: (800) 921-4292  
www.smokedturkeys.com

2008, he asked Voyles, his investment broker, to take it over.

### Time for a change

In addition to being his investment banker, Voyles caught Jack's attention because he was a major customer. To thank his clients for their business, Voyles regularly sent them Burge's hams and turkeys for holiday gifts, birthdays and other special events.

Jack Burge handpicked Voyles for another reason, as well.

"I think when he started thinking about retiring, particularly because it was a business his father started and had his name on it, he didn't want to just put it up for sale," Voyles says, adding that he hesitated at the offer initially, but, after mulling it over for about a year and a half, decided to jump in.

### Honoring tradition

The first goal for Voyles was to maintain the Burge's tradition. Both the Lewisville and Little Rock restaurants feature such items as smoked meat sandwiches, New Orleans' style "Poboy" sandwiches, beef and pork barbecue sandwiches, plates and ribs, fried catfish, and burgers and fries. The dessert menus differ the most with the Little Rock location offering Southern fried pies and Brent and Sam's cookies, while the Lewisville location also sells the fried pies while maintaining its dairy bar tradition with such items as malts, shakes and banana splits, among other tasty treats.

"We cook everything from scratch," Voyles said. "You order a burger or fish, we cook it to your order. We aren't cooking 60 pieces of fish and waiting for people to come by. And when we're really crowded, people may have to wait 15 minutes for fish, but what I've seen is people would rather do that. Plus, they're in an environment where

they're comfortable and having a good time. They know their food is cooked just for them."

Voyles pointed out the longevity of the staff at Burge's in the Heights, including three members of a single family — Louise Henderson, who has worked at the restaurant for 30 years, and her daughter, Audra Henry, and son, Willie Ward. Voyles noted that Henderson makes the coleslaw and the extremely



The smoked ham is the biggest seller.

popular turkey salad from scratch. "We sell 80-100 containers of turkey salad a day; more during the holidays. It's not unusual for someone to come in and get six quarts with a checklist in front of them. They've come from Dallas and they've been told not to come back without it! Our turkey salad travels to Oklahoma, New York ... a lot of kids who grew up in this area, when they call their parents, that's on their request list, 'next time you come, bring the turkey salad.' "

Both the Little Rock and the



Smoked turkey and fries.

Lewisville restaurants are still going strong, but it's the smoked turkey operation that's earned the Burge name its greatest claim to fame. The Burge website is, after all, SmokedTurkeys.com. All the birds are smoked in Lewisville, in a facility that's grown exponentially as word has spread about the famed Burge's smoked turkeys. The smoker kicks up early each year, smoking turkeys as they come in. The smoked meats are then frozen and kept in reserve until they're needed. Although Burge's is best known for the turkey, selling about 12,000 whole smoked turkeys a year, it's the spiral sliced half-ham that is the company's biggest seller. ▀

Dining recommendations? Contact Rob Roedel at [rroedel@aecc.com](mailto:rroedel@aecc.com)