



# 101 Years and Counting: The Ozark Café

By Douglas White

Smack dab in the heart of the Ozark National Forest, just a few miles south of America's first national river, in the town square of Jasper, lies one of Arkansas' oldest and finest restaurants, the historic Ozark Café.

Established in 1909 by Dick Brasel, this little gem continues to have a loyal following among locals while attracting new customers using modern social networking. (The café boasts over 500 fans on Facebook.) It doesn't hurt that the food is exceptional.

The 135 miles of the Buffalo River, with its high bluffs and breathtaking vistas, have delighted thousands of paddlers for many years. Whether a first-time floater in a rented canoe, or an experienced kayaker, the Buffalo is one of the most photographed and celebrated tourist attractions in the state.

Less than 5 miles from the middle of the river lies the quiet burg of Jasper. Jasper was founded in 1842 and is home to 500 citizens. The town square features the Newton County courthouse, with Jasper as county seat. Just north of the courthouse lies the 3,200 square foot Ozark Café, with its red awnings and hand-painted sign.

My first visit to the café was in 1999, in between a five-day tent camping vacation on the Buffalo. My two teenage daughters and I enjoyed burgers and cheese fries, while sipping on vanilla shakes and savoring the air-conditioned comfort.

I have returned numerous times since, mostly during repeat camping excursions on the river. Each visit provides a new set of memories and, fortunately, with a fairly large menu, a new set of food options.

Current owners Timothy and Mona Ray have maintained the ambience of



Left: The Ozark Café restaurant, established in 1909.



Right: It's 9 a.m., the tables are full and owner Timothy Ray is still serving up breakfast.

yesteryear. As you step in the restaurant from the Court Street sidewalk, you will notice framed photos along the walls. Hundreds of images, many sepia-toned and decades old, provide a glimpse into days gone by. There are the obligatory stock photos from politicians – former governors and senators from all parts of the state.

Settle in to your bench seat and start perusing the menu. You can't go wrong with the old standard – two eggs “lookin' at ya” (over easy), a side of bacon, hash browns and a cup of Joe. Go ahead and order a side of biscuits and gravy for yourself or to share. Perfect.

The omelets are huge, as are the pancakes. Fresh blueberries, strawberries and raspberries – even chocolate chips – mixed into the thick batter. “Just like your momma used to make,” says the menu, and that about sums it up.

Moving on to lunch, Ozark Café's offerings are varied. Some need only look at the burger section – some 12 different offerings – to be content. The southwest burger with pepper jack cheese and salsa is *muy caliente* (very hot) and *muy delicioso* (very delicious). Fries are plentiful with all sandwiches and burgers, or get crazy and have some homemade onion rings.

But why stop at the burgers? The chef salad would make Elaine Benes green with envy (Jerry Seinfeld's friend who was on a quest for the perfect “giant

salad”). There's the homemade chili; tasty and filling on a crisp fall afternoon.

For dessert, four words: made-from-scratch-pies! And hand-scooped ice cream. Mercy.

It's easy to understand why the Ozark Café has survived a century (good grief, Teddy Roosevelt was president when they opened!). But it is more than mere survival. The restaurant has done a remarkable job of preserving the past while looking toward the future. The prices are quite reasonable and the service is country-friendly.

The Rays also own the Front Porch Inn, also in Jasper. This bed and breakfast offers three suites for the weary traveler. I may have to reconsider camping on the Buffalo – that way, I can stick around for another meal or two at one of my favorite feeding places in the state, the Ozark Café.



## HOURS

6:30 a.m. for breakfast. Lunch and dinner until 8 p.m.

## LOCATION

107 E. Court St., Jasper  
(north of Russellville off Scenic Arkansas 7)

## CONTACT

(870) 446-2976 or [www.thefrontporchinn.net/ozarkcafe.htm](http://www.thefrontporchinn.net/ozarkcafe.htm)