



Barbecue Heaven

By **Doug White**

Photos by Rob Roedel



All right, literalists, the buns do not come out smoking at Smokin' Buns restaurant.

In fact, the name refers to the smoking hot (as in very good) barbecue. How do I know this? Because the cute logo of this fine establishment features the bum of a pig. Get it? Smokin' Buns!

Barbecue aficionados love their "cue." It is borderline fanatical for some. To claim that a restaurant is "the best" barbecue ever is heresy. How dare you? You haven't tried "insert name here." Most of these places are holes-in-the-wall (some of our favorite restaurants are holes-in-the-wall – nothing wrong with that). Some are off the beaten path. Smokin' Buns would perhaps be considered off the beaten path, but it is certainly no hole-in-the-wall.

Just north of the eastern edge of the Little Rock Air Force Base in Jacksonville, Smokin' Buns is a nicely decorated, expansive new building with seating for 130 diners. And on most Wednesdays through Saturdays, it is packed with barbecue and catfish lovers from near and far.



The restaurant's owners, Cory and Miranda Nicholson, grew up in restaurants. Both of their families owned and operated food establishments, so it was natural for these two newlyweds to be drawn to the family business.

"We knew we wanted to open a restaurant, but we also knew the risks," said Cory.

So, to test the waters, the couple opened a barbecue stand in front of their car wash off Arkansas 107, where they had a loyal following. "We cut our teeth with the stand and gained confidence to build the restaurant next door," he said.

Miranda remembers the opening night of Smokin' Buns in October of 2008. "I was a nervous wreck but Cory was Mr. Cool. We survived and here we still are!" she said.

Survived, to be sure. The Nicholsons appear to have thrived. On our recent Wednesday lunch visit, the place was packed with servicemen from the Air Force base, along with linemen from First Electric Cooperative (who proudly serve the restaurant) and families from in and out of town. "It's like a little community within a community," said Cory.

The restaurant is comfortable and tastefully decorated, with high ceilings and large tables and booths. The open kitchen at the rear produces that unmistakable aroma of barbecue. The wait staff was simply wonderful. They were knowledgeable, friendly and quick with a refill.

But it is the food, specifically the barbecued meats, that is the star of the show. Our group tried a little of everything, including the appetizers. (We highly recommend the "Pig Skins," a traditional potato skin topped with

pulled pork.) The salads were huge and the lettuce and toppings fresh. But, come on, we came here for the "cue"!

Smokin' Buns barbecue plates are huge, with your choice of beef brisket, "big butt" pulled pork and smoked sausage. Add two sides and a slice of Texas toast and you truly are in barbecue heaven. The brisket was perfect, lean and moist, with a proper amount of seasonings. The smoked sausage was a hit to be sure, but the pulled pork was a resounding favorite. That is, until we tried the ribs. The half-rack of beef ribs didn't last long. Cory's special dry rub includes some 18 spices. He slow cooks them, and when you hold one, the meat almost falls off the bone. Lip smackin' nirvana!



The friendly staff of Smokin' Buns.

There are sandwiches as well, including "The Boss," a jumbo barbecue beef sandwich topped with beans, coleslaw and your choice of sauce. Add some fries and you will be hard pressed to finish your meal.

Desserts? Of course. Smokin' Buns specializes in fried pies (chocolate, peach, berry and a very unique and very tasty sweet potato option). But the chocolate molten cake (ala mode, please) was a perfect ending to a perfect lunch.

Smokin' Buns is located at 25401 Arkansas 107 near Jacksonville. The restaurant is open Wednesday through Saturday from 10:45 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. To-go orders are welcomed. Call 501-988-2867 to find out the daily specials. Want to know more? Find video interviews, photos, recipes and more at Arkansas Living on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/ArkansasLivingMagazine>. Do you have a restaurant to recommend for Doug? Contact him at doug.white@aecc.com.

