

Ribs on the Mississippi

By Mi Ae Lipe-Butterbrodt



Diners watch the Julia Belle Swain return to port from Piggy's atrium.

If the wind is blowing right, under the big blue Main Channel Bridge in La Crosse, Wisconsin, the scent of hickory smoke will lead you to the best ribs you may ever eat on the Upper Mississippi River.

Welcome to Piggy's Steakhouse, whose motto is "We overlook nothing but the Mississippi." Don't be put off by the name; people from all over the Midwest travel here to

sample its barbecued pork and gourmet steaks.

With its dark green walls, soft lighting and antique stained-glass windows, Piggy's decor is reminiscent of an elegant pub, with whimsical porcine touches: a wooden, fat-cheeked pig stands sentry by the front door, and enormous oil paintings of colorful pigs lolling about adorn the walls. A massive, ornately hand-carved, 1890s oak bar beck-

ons as you enter the dining room, but it is the unobstructed sight of the roiling Mississippi through enormous picture windows in the two-story solarium straight ahead that captivates, hinting of the dining experience to come.

In the solarium, were it not for the stability of the floor beneath you, you might believe you were in a boat. To the north is Riverside Park, with its genteel sidewalks and

benches, home of the paddlewheel-er *Julia Belle Swain*. Directly across the river lies the sandy expanse of the Pettibone Park beach and its tan stucco bathhouse. To the south is the Main Channel Bridge and just beyond its towers, a quaint assortment of boathouses lines the river's edge.

The building began life as a foundry before becoming a river-front bar called the Loading Dock. In 1979, Gary Roberts opened his restaurant. His original plan was to serve ribs in a casual setting, where customers could sit on bench seats and plow elbow-deep into their barbecue. But after he purchased the antique bar, Roberts confessed "it changed the quality of the interior and somewhere after that I lost control."

But Roberts, a native of nearby Sparta with 40 years in the restaurant business, has not lost control. "We are absolutely devoted to making sure everything is the highest quality here," he said.

Piggy's customers eat nearly 30 tons of pork every year. Besides its famous BBQ baby back ribs and pork chops, Piggy's serves New York strip, tenderloin, filet mignon and sirloin steaks, all USDA Prime. Anything that is roasted goes into Piggy's own on-site smoker, fueled by hickory cut from the surrounding bluffs.

I was not disappointed the night that I visited. I ordered a half slab of BBQ baby back ribs, a spinach salad and Lyonnaise potatoes, a Piggy's specialty. The salad consisted of slightly tired raw spinach, red onions and mushrooms, generously topped with bits of blackened bacon that were deliciously salty and smoky. The waitress asked me to be patient, for the ribs take about a half hour, coming directly from the smoker to the table.

This is true barbecue at its best. The richly perfumed rib meat takes on a chewy bacon-like texture and a flavor that will transport you to hog

heaven, even without Piggy's award-winning sauce served on the side. The ribs were so good that I soon wished I had ordered a full slab. The potatoes, fried with bits of onion and bacon, were exceptionally savory and not too greasy.

The menu features pork chops, smoked prime rib, BBQ chicken, steaks, shrimp, king crab legs, lobster tails, pork and steak sandwiches, burgers, and other entrees that combine porcine, marine and bovine delicacies, such as crab and ribs. Vegetarians can choose from Piggy's salad bar, a variety of meatless appetizers, a Caesar or spinach salad, and the popular portabello

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mushroom sandwich. And if given enough notice, Piggy's can make to order just about anything.

If you still have room for dessert, Piggy's won't disappoint. By far their most popular is Mississippi Mud Pie, a sumptuous creation of chocolate and mocha ice cream in an Oreo cookie crust, with a rich, gooey chocolate sauce served on the side for dipping. They also have strawberry torte, cheesecake, chocolate layer cake and a variety of ice cream drinks.

Most entrees range between \$15 and \$30, and include a salad and a choice of potato or rice. Sandwiches and burgers are under \$10 and include fries. The quality of Piggy's food and service is what you might expect in prestigious restaurants in metropolitan cities, but not at big-city prices.

Since 1998, the *Wine Spectator* has awarded Piggy's an international "Award of Excellence" for having one of the most outstanding wine lists in the world. Piggy's features no fewer than 25 wines served by the glass. Roberts is particularly proud of his wine collection, which comprises nearly 5,000 bottles from the United States, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. Opus One, Berenger Private Reserve and Kenwood Artist Series are some of his favorites, but if a diner can't choose a single bottle to go with a meal, Piggy's can serve three-ounce "tastes" from three sample bottles. Tours of the wine cellar are available upon request.

"We also do quite a bit of catering," says Roberts, "but we put on productions, not just deliver food. Our motto is that we can do anything, even roasting whole pigs and whisking away used napkins from the guests' plates." One memorable party took place on a yacht, where Roberts and his staff served duck breast and crême brûlée, and even provided the fireworks.

Its rigorous standards and outstanding food have earned Piggy's an enviable reputation. The *Milwaukee Journal* named Piggy's one of "The Best 25 Restaurants in Wisconsin," and the National Pork Producers Council awarded it "Restaurant of the Year" in 1989 and 1990. Martin Sheen has dined here, as have Brett Favre, Mike Ditka, Barry Alvarez and the Blue Angels pilots.

Piggy's is open evenings only, from 5 to 10 Monday through Friday, and 4 to 11 on Saturday and Sunday. It is located in downtown La Crosse at 328 S. Front St. Reservations are recommended ([608] 784-4877 or toll-free 1-888-865-9632). The restaurant can be reserved during lunch hours for groups or special occasions. Smoking is permitted in the bar area only. ☞ 本

Mi Ae Lipe-Butterbrodt is associate editor of *Big River*.