

# Beilue: Authentic Amarillo-style barbecue in Nebraska?

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Jon Mark Beilue

Column

For the best authentic Texas barbecue around, for some of those famous ribs cooked on hickory logs, for some of that "tooth-crackin' cold beer," as is advertised, check out Amarillo Texas-Style Barbecue Restaurant ... in Bellevue, Nebraska?

Strange-sounding, but true.

"Amarillo Barbecue, this is Sheila," said the voice over the phone.

Sheila Tschirren has been the general manager of The Amarillo, as it's known in Bellevue, since it opened 18 years ago. Never been to Amarillo, the city, that is, though she has been as close as Oklahoma. But if she could?

"I think it would be wonderful," she said.

But owner and originator Gordon Campbell, a native Texan, has. He used to come to Amarillo frequently when he was in medical sales in Lubbock and had the West Texas territory. That probably seems like a lifetime ago.

Then he went to Seattle to open some health food stores, and then to Omaha, Neb., to open a health food manufacturing company. It was after Campbell moved there that he got mad, mad of the utter lack of quality local restaurants.

Campbell is from Corpus Christi, and he remembers the good seafood places there as well as good Mexican food and barbecue joints when he traveled half the state in his sales job.

Omaha, with a population of more than 600,000 in the metro area, didn't seem to have any.

"I love food," Campbell said, "and I was mad."

Mad enough to do something radical. Taking a leap of faith, he decided to open a restaurant. He wanted to specialize in Texas barbecue, which is different than the nearby famous Kansas City barbecue.

KC and Memphis barbecue is more pork with sauce on the meat. We tend to go more for the brisket with sauce on the side.

What Campbell needed was a name to reflect that this barbecue was different, that it was Texas-style. Credit wife Patty with the name idea.

"We were coming back from Kansas City where we'd gone to sample some of their barbecue and we were trying to come up with a name," he said. "My wife loved the song 'Amarillo By Morning.' She said, 'Why don't we have Amarillo in the name?'

"I was real familiar with Amarillo on my sales run, and I loved the people of the Panhandle. Having Amarillo in the name just seemed to fit."

That was in 1988, and 18 years later, The Amarillo Texas-Style Barbecue Restaurant is not only still in business, but doing remarkably well some 717 miles north of the other Amarillo, Texas.

The first day it opened, it was packed, helped quite a bit from the transplanted Texans from Offutt Air Force Base, just two miles away. It hasn't slowed down any since.

The Amarillo is about 3,500 square feet and seats 100. It has become a caloric institution over the years for folks with a hankering for barbecue in an area where good barbecue is not easy to find. Campbell has nixed numerous offers to expand or franchise.

"I refuse to," he said. "I have never followed the dollar sign. It's about the quality. I like to inspect every plate of food that goes out."

Campbell said The Amarillo is more of a rib joint than anything, and a Kansas City barbecue judge has anointed the place as having the best ribs in the country. A recent reader survey in the Omaha World-Herald voted The Amarillo as the top barbecue restaurant in the city.

Cooking is exclusively on hickory logs, not electricity or gas. Campbell buys 40,000 hickory logs every three or four months from southern Missouri.

Clientele is loyal and varied. A postman has eaten there 400 times, though for his wife's sake, let's hope he passed a few times on the pinto beans.

Celebrities have taken a liking to The Amarillo. Actor Sean Penn, shooting a movie nearby, once rented the restaurant for a private party of 100. Kenny Chesney's people ordered 40 racks of ribs during a concert stay.

Faith Hill, Tim McGraw, Garth Brooks, Brooks and Dunn, Alan Jackson and even Britney Spears have either had the

barbecue catered or stopped by to eat. One who hasn't, oddly, is George Strait, who had a big hand in the name.

"We're still working on him," Campbell said.

The owner said his place has even won over the toughest customers.

"A lot of people have come in and said that we're from Texas and we know you're going to disappoint us," Campbell said. "And then they'll leave saying no place in Texas serves brisket as good as yours."

In fact, two men from Amarillo have come in twice in the last two years to order two racks of ribs and five dishes of pinto beans.

The Amarillo Texas-Style Barbecue Restaurant, located on Fort Crook Road North, is just a mere 11-hour, 22-minute drive away. Should a real live Amarilloan drop in, and can prove it, look up Gordon. He'll be in the kitchen.

"Just yell at me," he said. "I'll give them a tour and buy them their meal."

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