



Famous ly Dave

Sure as spareribs are messy, Dave Anderson of Famous Dave's will bring barbecue out of the backyard and into the national spotlight.

BY KITTY SHEA

It's not the noise that wakes her in morning's early hours. It's the aroma, which can travel the olfactory spectrum from delicious to suspicious. She taps on their thirteen-year-old son's bedroom door. "Tim? Are you awake? Should we go see what Dad is up to?"

"She" is Kathy Anderson. Her husband and Tim's dad is Famous Dave. Abutting her kitchen is a culinary laboratory the size of a large pantry. Stainless-steel marinating chambers consume the space. Trays hold a vast collection of bottled barbecue sauces and mustards, cans of tomato purée and raspberries, and herbs and spices in containers so copious that the idea of using a mere teaspoon seems laughable. This is where the chair of Famous Dave's of America pursues his ambition while family, employees, shareholders, and customers sleep.

There was a time when Dave Anderson was content with leftover ribs from his electrician father's lunch bucket. (Seems his dad's coworkers knew the best noontime haunts.) Anderson was Chicago's son as well, absorbing not only his hometown's slow-smoked barbecue but also its smokin' blues. When he was the age of his and Kathy's elder son, twenty-year-old James, Dave Anderson began smoking meat in garbage cans and concocting what would become his signature sauces. Thousands of batches later, his is the "Best BBQ Sauce in America," according to the American Royal Barbecue Contest—the barbecue biggie—in Kansas City, as well as the Great American Rib Cookoff in Cleveland and the Twin Cities Ribfest.

Adulthood took Anderson in many directions *outside* the kitchen: into bankruptcy as a wholesale florist; to his mother's tribe, the Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwa in Wisconsin, to run its businesses; to Harvard for a master's in public administration sans an undergrad degree in anything. Through it all, his barbecue bent burned on, even in 1989, when he helped form Grand Casinos and later the Rainforest Cafe in Minnesota.

"Even though I worked for other businesses, whatever city I

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was in, I was always testing what I call 'the legendary bastions of great barbecue,'" says the forty-four-year-old entrepreneur, who remains a Grand Casinos investor. Anderson visited storefronts in Memphis and Chicago, smokehouses in the foothills of Georgia and Tennessee, and huge mesquite pits in Texas. "Having been to almost every barbecue joint in the country," he says, "I came to realize that I had created really great barbecue."

"Had" suggests that he's folded his apron. But a *sniff-sniff* at Anderson's home when all is dark elsewhere in Edina indicates that he's not one to rest on his recipes. "In my earlier days, I literally stuffed my mouth full of raw spices—I'd blanch them in olive or peanut oil or boil them so I could understand their different flavor profiles," he says, wearing, as always, a baseball cap emblazoned with his company's ubiquitous pig mascot. "With all that's in barbecue sauce, you become a flavorist. I can picture in my mind how this food will taste."

Anderson's sense of taste feeds a big business. The company ended 1997 with 14 Famous Dave's restaurants—10 in or near the Twin Cities—and expects to wind up this year with 51. Outstate Minnesota will have Famous Dave's to call its own. A barbecue-and-blues club like Anderson's Calhoun Square restaurant will stake its place in Chicago this year. All told, Phase I of the plan has Famous Dave's in eight north-central states (plus Kentucky) within two years—and heading deep into barbecue country.

Conquering the country takes one stoked piggy bank. Famous Dave's of America raised \$15 million in its initial public offering in October 1996, when investors bit on plans to roll the backyard barbecue concept out of Minnesota's backyard. But in the fourth quarter of 1997 revenue fell short of analyst expectations, sinking the stock 44 percent. "Fourth quarter was a gut check at Famous Dave's," says Doug Lanham, the company's chief executive and operating officer. "The euphoria and excitement of our fast growth caught up with us. We took our eye off the ball. Our endgame is to have a

widely respected growth restaurant company, realizing our race is a marathon, not a one-hundred-yard dash." At the end of January, the company reported it had tempered its estimates but had left the concept and menu alone.

That menu announces itself to neighborhoods with a hickory-smoked invitation to the nose. Delivered in garbage-can lids (a tribute to boy-Dave's humble smoker) and barge-sized baskets, it's elbows-on-the-table, dig-in fare: ribs St. Louis-style, Georgia chopped pork, Texas beef brisket, chicken. A tabletop roll of paper towels emboldens your reach toward squirt bottles of Dave's Rich & Sassy, Texas Pit, Georgia Mustard, and Hot Stuff sauces. You like picnic fare? Dave's "pit crew" prepares it all. You want pasta, you go to Italy.

Famous Dave's restaurants are all-American and all-Americana. Vintage Coca-Cola signs, hubcaps, license plates, and nostalgic clutter seal the theme while the blues pound out the love and pain of America's heartland. Anderson's fingerprints are on many of the antiques and all of the music. "I'm probably the only chairman of a company who's selected every single song played in his restaurants," he crows.

Twenty-five to 30 percent of Famous Dave's business is takeout, suggesting that a Weber grill or two out there has been retired. Home cooks can pick up his sauces and slathered frozen beef, chicken, and pork at area supermarkets. The cookbook *Famous Dave Reveals His Secret Award-Winning Recipes* will be published this year by FRP Press. The restaurant's banner will flap at summer rib fests and blues festivals. *Famous Dave's Sweet Home Blues* is the working title of his CD collection of blues by national recording artists. In the time it takes to say "We'll have the All-American BBQ Feast for Two," Famous Dave's is becoming a brand.

"This project is bigger than just restaurants," Anderson says. "We're in a niche that's never been done before. Because of that, there's a wonderful opportunity for a whole variety of spinoff projects that will make Famous Dave's a household name." ■

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