



Beilue: 'The Amarillo' is moving, just not to Amarillo

By Jon Beilue

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The Amarillo Restaurant is big on Texas-style barbecue, but not so much on geography. The place just gets further and further away from its namesake.

For 22 years, those from Joe Average to celebrities like actor Sean Penn, and country music artists Kenny Chesney, Faith Hill, Tim McGraw Garth Brooks and Alan Jackson filled a plate of barbecue that was cooked on hickory logs from the place. Even Britney Spears ate some of the renowned barbecue at the Amarillo Texas-Style Barbecue Restaurant.

But the place was in Bellevue, Neb., some 717 miles north of Amarillo. Now, it's up and moving. Is it ever.

In just a couple of months, the slightly renamed Amarillo Restaurant and Tavern will open in Monroe, Wash., which if you go to the corner of Soncy and Amarillo Boulevard and continue northwest for 1,772 miles, you can't miss it. It's 116 E. Main Street.

"We got transferred," Connie Adams said.

Perhaps a bit of backstory. In 2006, I wrote a column on this barbecue restaurant with Amarillo in its name. Located in suburban Omaha, owner Gordon Campbell had been packing them in since 1988.

Nebraskans and those from nearby Offutt Air Base went there to get their barbecue fix. A reader survey in the Omaha World-Herald voted The Amarillo the top barbecue restaurant in the city.

Campbell named the restaurant after the city because, first, it was going to be Texas barbecue that's more brisket with sauce on the side, and not the famous nearby Kansas City barbecue that's more pork with sauce on the meat. Secondly, his wife, Patty, liked George Strait's "Amarillo by Morning."

Campbell used to be in medical sales in Lubbock, had the West Texas territory and was familiar with Amarillo. So Amarillo it was.

But then, around 2008, a major highway got rerouted in Bellevue, and The Amarillo's visibility decreased. Business dipped, and Campbell wasn't getting any younger. In 2010, he decided to retire. Campbell didn't own the building, but everything else went up for auction.

"We knew the history," Brian Adams said. "It was known countrywide. We thought this was something we wanted to do."

The Adams were tiring of work in the corporate world. Their passion was cooking and entertaining. Friends said they should open a restaurant.

"So we had a little bit of a leap of faith," Connie said.

In a proxy auction, the Adams acquired the business. Basically, they acquired the intellectual property — the name, if they wanted to keep it, the recipes, the business listing, the website. The original smokers were too old, and were a fire hazard.

The bought a commercial smoker out of New York — “but it’s made in Mesquite, Texas,” Brian said — that held 1,000 pounds of meat. They had it in their driveway in the Omaha area, and neighbors brought over meat and they’d smoke it for them.

All they needed was a building — and then Brian, still in medical sales, got transferred in 2014 to the Seattle metro area. Ouch.

“Yeah, so it’s been a work in progress,” Connie said.

But it’s progressing. They live in Lake Stevens, Wash., but in pursuit of a place, they finally found one in Monroe, a town of 18,000 32 miles northeast of Seattle. It’s old, rustic, a former tavern known as Paradise. It’s perfect — that is after some updating and enlarging the kitchen.

They hired a chef, Colin Evans, whom they sent to Texas to see what he could learn from some expert pit masters. They even had Evans help in remodeling. They’ve also added extra equipment in the 3,000-square-foot place.

And the name? It’s not changing. Well, it is a little bit. It’s simply the Amarillo Restaurant and Tavern. Unlike the old Amarillo, they’ll add steaks, burgers, salads and vegan options. But 90 percent of the menu, Adams said, will be the barbecue recipes Campbell used in Nebraska, all of it cooked on imported hickory.

“We have to keep the name,” Brian said. “We have to keep the legacy. Amarillo is associated with Texas. So we’re not putting ‘Texas style’ in it. Just the name itself would suggest that.”

The Adams have never been to Amarillo, missing out on a chance when they were in Texas not that long ago inspecting some barbecue pits in other regions. They ran out of time, but it’s a worthy goal.

And if you're hungry for yet some more Texas barbecue, but in a different place, just head up through Colorado Springs, Denver, southern Wyoming, northern Utah, Boise, a slice of Oregon and you're almost there.

Eleven years ago, I asked Campbell if anyone proved they were from Amarillo, could they get VIP treatment? He said he'd give them a tour and buy them a meal. So, what about it, Brian and Connie, same deal?

"Absolutely," Connie said. "We have to continue the tradition."

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