

Down at the Ribber

Comfort, consistency and community with seriously delicious beef from the hickory fire grill.

by Micah Mensing, Certified Angus Beef LLC

Drive the Ohio River Scenic Byway in the open air or walk along the trails east of the Scioto River confluence and you might notice the sights and sounds of nature in the valley. If you don't hail from Portsmouth, Ohio, the aroma of slow-burning hickory could make you wonder, but locals and beef lovers from hours away already know what it means.

Follow your nose and you'll come to the heart of town where the Scioto Ribber satisfies more than just curiosity.

Owner-manager Darren Mault, family and friends welcome all who dine or drink here with the "Southern hospitality" his restaurant encompasses.

The restaurant's namesake river and thousands of customers come down from state capital Columbus, drive in from Cincinnati or cross the bridge from Charleston, W.Va., and Lexington, Ky., all within a two-hour radius. Folks from the little places in between join in the experience where Old South meets the Midwest.

Early stages

Mault's father, Steven, always dreamed of owning a bar when he bought the downtown café in 1978, but his son comments with a slight

smirk, "Mom wasn't always on the same page. She'd always say, if you're gonna serve alcohol, you need to serve some type of food."

Neighbors already knew the Maults could cook, sharing smoked ribs in the family's backyard for years. So it wasn't long before the advice to add food to bar fare became a reality, if not a profit center.



Wood-fired grills cook each ribeye to perfection.

"We started giving away chicken wings for Monday Night Football. One thing led to another, and before we knew it — I'd say in the early '80s — we really became a restaurant," Mault says.

At first, the place was only open two days a week, and the family never imagined their enterprise would grow by word-of-mouth to thrive seven days a week. Nor did they suspect their volume of smoked ribs, grilled steaks and more would rank them

among the top independent sellers of the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand in the world, second only to Houston's famous Taste of Texas.

Consistent quality

Walking into the ornate bar and well-lit dining area, patrons may not guess the building dates back to the late 19th century. Today, it carries a

sense of more recent sports history.

Along the wood-paneled walls hang 40 or more framed photos of people considered "special guests" of the Ribber such as Cincinnati Bengals football players. Alongside the NFL all-stars who visit, images of political leaders, including Governor Mike DeWine, who comes in for a ribeye

when he's in the area.

You don't need to be in one of those framed photos or famous to enjoy the restaurant's renowned famous fare, but you'll feel like it, in a down-home way.

"We will have people make a day trip from places like Akron and even farther to have a good quality meal and experience some Southern hospitality on the river," Mault says.

Being located on a scenic byway brings weekend motorcyclists, too,

he says. “People come down for the beautiful sights and end up leaving with a full stomach.”

Uniquely awesome

The faint odors of burning hickory that fill the town come from the wood-fired grills that cook each ribeye to perfection.

Scioto Ribber cooks all those steak entrees on an open-fire grill with the hickory wood that brings out the unique taste customers have come to expect. A relatively small kitchen serves well enough for preparing side dishes, but most of the work happens outside on the spacious back patio. That’s where you’ll find three wood-fired grills, four pallets of hickory and the door to the cooler, where the magic truly begins.

From the beginning, the family has cut the meat they cook from wholesale primals.

“This allows us to have the most freshly cut, consistent product size possible,” Mault says.

Cooler inventory, cutting and consistency make a difference; but what actually makes the Scioto Ribber unique?

“It’s how we cook it, and our ability to provide a really good piece of meat for a fair price,” Mault says.

The passion of the 35 to 45 employees is as fiery as their grills out back.

“Most of our staff have been here for 20 or 30 years, which has created a family atmosphere here at the Ribber,” he says.

Some of that is literal.

“Many family and friends have helped along the way,” Mault says, “but I also have two nephews working here; my son and a niece have helped out as well.”

It all goes into meeting the



priority goal: “give our customers the best possible experience, whether it’s beef or any of our other items, as well as great service. We’re getting that done, because most of the time during typical dining hours, you will find us at our full 140-seat capacity,” he says.

Getting the Ribber experience is not limited to just the restaurant.

Recently, the Maults started to capitalize on requests for catering that now serve groups from 30 to more than 3,000.

“We don’t say no to really anybody,” he says. “We’ve been an hour away from some of those, and now those people come visit us here in Portsmouth.”

Premium beef done right

“I understand growing up in this area with farming, and the amount of work that is put in can sometimes be underappreciated,” Mault says to producers. “Yet, know that we at Scioto Ribber appreciate you.”

It’s all about the premium beef, the cookery and the atmosphere. Sure, there have been a few news features and profiles on the Ribber, but no organized advertising or marketing.

“Other than people leaving here and telling other people they need to come and try it, we really don’t market ourselves, except for helping out local schools and things of that nature,” Mault says.

Two great ideas with 1978 Ohio origins came together only recently, but it was probably inevitable. Mault’s quest for consistent top-quality beef led to distributors suggesting he try CAB a few years ago. That led to what Mault calls “heavy purchasing” since 2013 and finally licensing in 2017.

“These guys are quickly approaching the million-pound mark in purchases since they have started buying the brand,” notes Steve Ringle, CAB director of business development and analysis. “In the last 12 months alone, they bought more than 175,000 pounds; what’s more, they have shown growth in each of those five years.

“No wonder people are talking about the Ribber,” Ringle says, “...when they aren’t eating their delicious beef!” [AJ](#)

Editor’s note: Micah Mensing is a Certified Angus Beef LLC intern.