

# The News & Observer

## Nothing but ribs - and don't ask

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The sweet aroma of barbecue permeates the darkness as the eyes adjust to the large, dimly lit room. A single 100-watt light-bulb swings behind the bar as Roscoe the lone bartender teases a regular customer. A neon light spelling "Roll Tide" bathes part of restaurant in an eerie red glow. Big Daddy sits quietly a few feet from the heat of the soot-stained barbecue pit, his pipe jutting proudly between clenched teeth. He says "Thank you" and smiles broadly when complimented on his food. Longtime waitress Jeannie weaves gracefully between packed tables and happy customers. Shouts for racks of pork ribs and cans of beer barely rise above the sounds of gnawing teeth, smacking lips and guttural groans of joy.

Welcome to Dreamland.

Ribs. Just pork ribs. Nothing more. Except for a stack of fresh white loaf bread. Soft drinks. Beer. Toothpicks. And of course, more ribs.

The slogan on Dreamland T-shirts reads "No Slaw. No Beans. No Potato Salad. Don't Ask!"

"I brought a girl from out of town here one night," says a customer, sipping sauce with her last slice of bread. "She asked for a fork! Can you believe it? A fork. They laughed her the hell outta here."

There are no forks at Dreamland Barbecue. No spoons. No knives. Diners dig in with their fingers first, grabbing at meaty ribs dripping with Big Daddy's secret, spicy sauce. Finger-licking is mandatory. Wearing a bib is optional.

Regulars know the drill: Get in line at the door. Wait your turn for a table. Sit down. Tell the waitress how many racks of ribs you wish to consume and what you want to drink. Then eat. Drink. Eat.



Pay. Get out (or at least slide over and make some room for extra diners), so the waitress can make some more money.

A waitress delivers the glorious ribs on plain white paper plates, plopping them down in front of customers like a mother feeding her hungry children. Eyes and smiles widen at the taste of charred baby back ribs piled high and swimming in sauce. Teeth tear at the bones, gnawing off the succulent meat. Slices of white bread make their way into munching mouths. Without asking, the waitress drops a full ream of paper napkins on each corner of the long Formica table. She knows what diners need. Cold beer cools the warming palate. Upper-lip sweat salts each bite.

Bare, meatless bones pile up on the table. Paper plates fill with napkins, crumbled and stained red with sauce. Empty cans of beverages disappear and fresh cans seem to magically take their place. More ribs are called for. More bread, too. Toothpicks poke out from the lips of the satisfied, pushed back some from the table. Eventually, all mouths will have toothpicks. Bellies full, too.

A thirty-something couple celebrating their wedding anniversary receives a gift basket of T-shirts and jars of Big Daddy's sauce. The staff poses for a picture soon to be in the tourist's scrapbook.

Having eaten at Dreamland, diners become a part of the family. Regulars earn hugs, "hey, sweeties," and sincere questions about the kids. First-timers are welcomed like long-lost cousins, and by meal's end they are honorary sisters and brothers of the Bishop brood. When diners reluctantly push themselves away from the table to leave, the waitress really means it when she says "Y'all come back." Hugs go all around.

The creaky screen door slams shut as a patron carries out a stained doggy bag bound for home, passing hungry diners waiting patiently for their turn to enter and old dogs hoping for a kind soul to spare a bone or two. A light spring rain drifts around the parking lot as the aromatic smoke of ribs over an open wood fire bathes Tuscaloosa's most famous eatery in a heavenly scent.

Dreamland indeed.