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Tasty, meaty ribs that tickle diners' fancies

Ribs are not so much an American national dish as a cult. They generate not so much devotion as addiction. Tulsa Rib Co., started as an afterthought appendage to a catering service, has become a Mecca of ribs so extraordinary they might have attained space on the carte of Escoffier.

David George, 35, was Magic Pan's bartender when he and Steve Parker, 25, a Hans Prager protege, coaxed chef Robert Sakellarides, 28, into joining them to launch Old World Caterers. Needing a means for keeping the cooks busy between orders, the partners converted Julie's Pantry, a 55-seat bandbox, into Tulsa Rib Co. I in February, 1981.

The satellite soon became the tail wagging the dog, lining up hungry true believers halfway around the block so often that last August the partners took over the ex-Casa de Sol at quadruple Tulsa I's capacity to embark on the next leg of their Odyssey of Ribs.

Chef Sakellarides, an Italian adopted by Greeks whose symphonic surname he is making famous in the world of gastronomy, is an established master of the continental cuisine he created for three years as dinner chef for Chanteclair. David George, of Syrian ancestry going back to Biblical times,



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occasionally hosts Middle Eastern feasts assembled by his mother, Elizabeth Nader George.

So why did they base their restaurant upon ribs, a generic everyman's favorite related in reverse snob appeal to the Great American Hamburger? "Ribs are simple to organize and easy to teach others to cook as spillover from the more exacting regimen of our catering operation," George told me.

And why Tulsa Rib? Because Dave George has never forgotten how hospitably he had been treated passing through that city years ago. Now he is making Tulsa famous on the Orange County culinary circuit although it isn't even the metropolis of Oklahoma.

In 30 months this sanctuary of tasty ribs has become legendary in Orange County. We had heard so much from so many about how good it is we couldn't wait to go. We also had heard so much from so many about how overcrowded it is we couldn't bear to go. When the new store was opened accommodating 120 diners plus 70 in the bar, we went.

We started with potato skins smothered by melted cheese plus bacon and served with diet-staggering sour cream and chives. Lime duck comprised an original tour de force, worthy of the finest continental kitchens in town. It combined roasted diced duck in light lime sauce stuffed with fried won ton shells and topped with kiwi and coconut.

We tasted cream of potato soup resembling spicy cheese-flavored clam chowder aswim with bacon and potato chunks. Dinner included choice of salad. Most irresistible was Elizabeth George's tabooli, a Levantine glory of minced bell peppers, cucumbers, tomatoes, light onions and parsley embellished with bulghour wheat and garnished with subtle mint and lemon oil vinaigrette. Not to be overlooked, however, was an alternative entailing carrots, cucumbers, red cabbage, lettuce and croutons tossed with avocado house dressing loaded with cream and seasonings — calories, inc.

Backbone of Tulsa Rib Co. is its battery of four rib offerings. Two of our trio elected Tulsa country ribs of boneless pork, plus baby pork back ribs oven roasted at low

temperature to preserve the juices, painstakingly defatted then reheated over the hickory pit before serving. Our beef choice of short ribs was boiled instead of baked, then pit-BBQd. We skipped the thick and meaty prime rib bones, a heavier number, although the favorite of many.

We had neither dreamed nor believed that meat clinging to bones could be so tender, so juicy, so tasty — so irresistible.

The ribs about rounded out the program at Tulsa I, but its sibling offers, in addition, chicken, rib eye steak and shrimp brochette. We tried chicken Del Re seasoned with lemon butter and basil then topped with avocado, melted cheese and tomatoes.

With entrees came cream corn seasoned with nutmeg and Tulsa fries, a seducer of cottage-style wheels deep-fried then sauteed with herbs, butter, garlic, lemon and Worcestershire sauce. These could be called "dilemma potatoes": it would be at least a misdemeanor to pass them, but a violation of every weight-watching tenet to indulge.

After all this we needed dessert about as much as a new tax but we capitulated to Tulsa cream pie and were defiantly glad we did, despite misgivings at letting the "chocolate decadence" get away . . .

Our blockbuster could be duplicated for about \$50 per couple, including wine and tip. Marcello Alvarez from Buenos Aires was a waiter worthy of the fare he served.

Paper napkins cannot cope with the ravages on clean hands of ribs and potato skins. At these prices a hot steamed towel or damp dish cloth may be too much to ask but a sturdy cloth serviette is a thing of need, not a luxury.

Tulsa Rib Co., American cuisine, featuring ribs. 3305 S. Bristol, Santa Ana. 241-9005. **Lunch:** Monday to Friday 11:30 to 4, \$3.95 to \$7.25. **Dinner:** daily 4 to 10, \$5.45 to \$10.95. **Credit Cards:** MC, V. **Parking:** ample. **Alcoholic Beverages:** full bar. **Reservations:** no. Also **Tulsa Rib Co. I**, 945 N. Tustin Ave., Orange 937-0236. (Wine and beer only).