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Penny Saver

The best values are just around the corner...

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I haven't tried every single rib joint in OC, it only feels like I have. Granted, OC is hardly BBQ country, but it does seem everyone has a favorite source for what they consider good BBQ, so those were the spots I tried in search of a smoky job well done.

Boy, did I eat some lousy food. Just when I wondered if I was the one with twisted tastebuds, three of those restaurants went belly-up. Whew. I wasn't alone after all.

So much for the losers. The clear winner in my pursuit was the humble **Tulsa Rib Company** in Orange. For years, they've quietly outdone the flashy newcomers and swaggering blowhards so common to the BBQ biz. How? By reliably serving moist, savory meats (ribs, really) and satisfying side dishes so good they beg to be ordered again next week.

Hefty meals of beef and pork ribs (\$9-\$13) are the call here. Sure, you can have a decent chicken-fried steak dinner (\$9) if you must, but try the ribs first. My favorites are the flavor-packed Country Pork ribs because they're boneless, tender and the leftovers make a great sandwich. The Baby Back ribs and Beef Short ribs are also meaty and commendable. Sampler dinners give you too much of some of each.

Tulsa Rib Company breaks with tradition when it comes to side dishes - they're very, very good. And since every dinner includes four, they convert good ribs into a great meal. Of the potato options, request their crispy, tangy and rightfully famous Tulsa Potatoes. And as odd as it seems, they make a superior Tabouli salad; it outshines the coleslaw by far, adding yet another reason to travel to Tulsa (in OC, CA).

Tulsa Rib Company

954 N. Tustin Ave. (at Collins), Orange, 633-3760.

Open daily for dinner, lunch, M-F. Beer and wine.

Casual dress. Take-out menu includes large quantities for feeding crowds.

Report Card: Food=A-, Mood=B-, Value=B+, Overall=B+

by Gretchen Kurz for Elmer Dills