

**Brick Pit** restaurant uses 75 percent pecan for smoking

How do you know you're really cookin'?

When a film crew comes to Mobile to name your restaurant's ribs as some of the best in the South

By DEBBIE LORD

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Bill Armbrecht, left, owner of the **Brick Pit**, talks with Jim Rink, a producer from Turner South. The restaurant's ribs were judged some of the best in the region. **Brick Pit**. The folks at Turner South television network would do well to open a branch office here, they're spending so much time down in our little slice of heaven tracking down good food.

A film crew was in town last week filming another installment of its "Blue Ribbon" program that highlights the best of the best in the South. This time, they followed their noses out to Old Shell Road, where they found some of the best barbecue in the world at the **Brick Pit**.

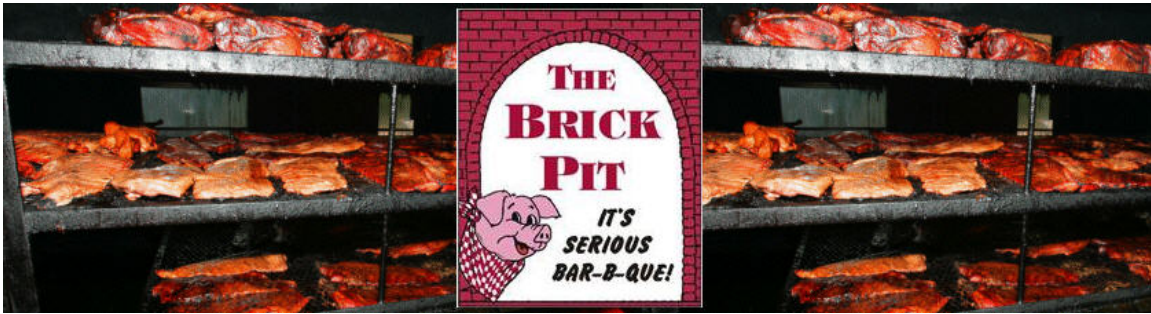
It's the network's second visit to the coast in four months hunting food; they were here in early March filming a segment at the Little Kitchen on the best fried chicken in the South.

Fried chicken and ribs - it doesn't get much more Southern than that.

Anyway, a crew of three spent the better part of last Thursday watching how Bill Armbrecht and his staff at the **Brick Pit** go about the serious business of slow smoking ribs that they have dubbed the "Best Wet Ribs in the Southeast." High praise, indeed, for a region that is more known for seafood than spicy, tender pork ribs.

"Not many places take the time to cook the ribs like we do," Bill said between filling orders and barking orders to the kitchen staff. Even with a film crew, it was business as usual for the popular eatery at 5456 Old Shell Road.

For those of you unfamiliar with the Turner South program, "Blue Ribbon" is a self-described "weekly treasure hunt for the best things in the South." They scour the region looking for the things that make Southerners unique.



Like ribs, for instance.

Slow-cooked pork is a source of tremendous regional pride, and its manufacture can differ from region to region. In the Carolinas, the sauce is thin and vinegary; in Texas barbecue invariably means beef; in Memphis the sauce is thick and sweet and the ribs are dry rubbed to perfection.

"There is a wide range of ribs and sauces across the South. Everywhere you go it's different, and that's what makes it great," said Jim Rink, the producer for this segment.

He and his crew were coming off an extended road trip that stretched from South Carolina to Memphis, Tenn., and Atlanta.

"What we are looking for are unique recipes that are unique to the community," he said.

An air date has yet to be determined, but it will probably be early next year. "Blue Ribbon" airs Wednesdays at 9:30 p.m. on Turner South.

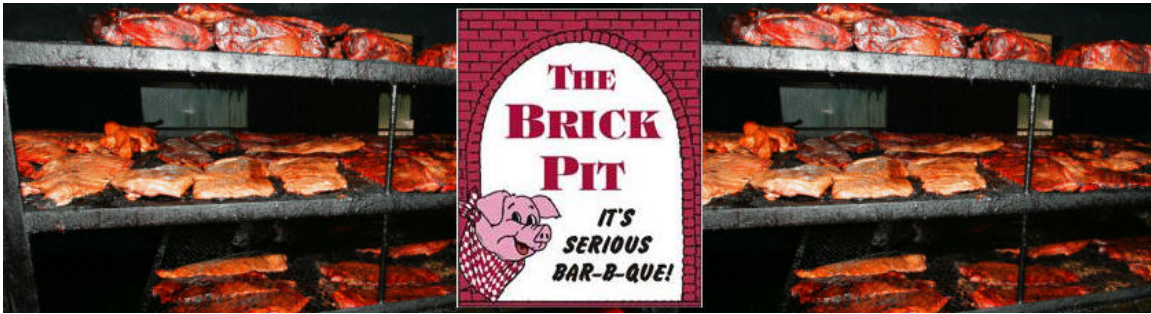
Like any master barbecue cook worth his salt, Bill, 48, steadfastly refuses to divulge the secret to his tender, juicy ribs or his sauce. In chatting with the amiable ambassador of barbecue, you can glean tasty bits of information about his methodology, though.

Officially they start the day's work at 8 every morning. But in the barbecue business, the days tend to run together in a seamless ritual of tending fires, adding meats and retrieving cooked meats from the massive **pit**.

"We put our ribs on the afternoon before we will sell them for lunch," Bill said. The Boston butts, which are used for pulled pork, take even longer. Chickens aren't cooked as long.

It's an endless merry-go-round of smoky goodness.

As you might imagine, it takes a deft hand and sensitive eye to know just when to fetch and turn the meats on the custom-made smoker located out back of the restaurant. That's the job of Jerry Edwards, who is the **pit** master for the **Brick Pit**.



He gingerly opens the door to the giant red pit and glances at the racks of ribs and roasts before deciding that a bit more fire is needed. Another door, down below and off to the left, is opened and a chunk of wood is heaved into the fire.

Rink is somewhat surprised to learn that Bill doesn't season his ribs prior to cooking, a contradiction of sorts from what he's found at the other award-winning barbecue joints to be featured on the segment.

"Nope, nothing. We let the smoke do the flavoring," Bill said.

"We use a mixture of 75 percent pecan and 25 percent hickory," he said.

The combination results in a sweet, pungent aroma that's overpowering.

But if smoke is the life's blood of a good rib, then the sauce is the mother's milk. Again, Bill guards the secret of his sauce like it was the key to the kingdom; in some respects, it is.

In a rare moment of candor he offers that there are nine ingredients, including ketchup, mustard and a vinegar mixture, that make up his sauce. It also contains some sort of sweetener, but he won't say what.

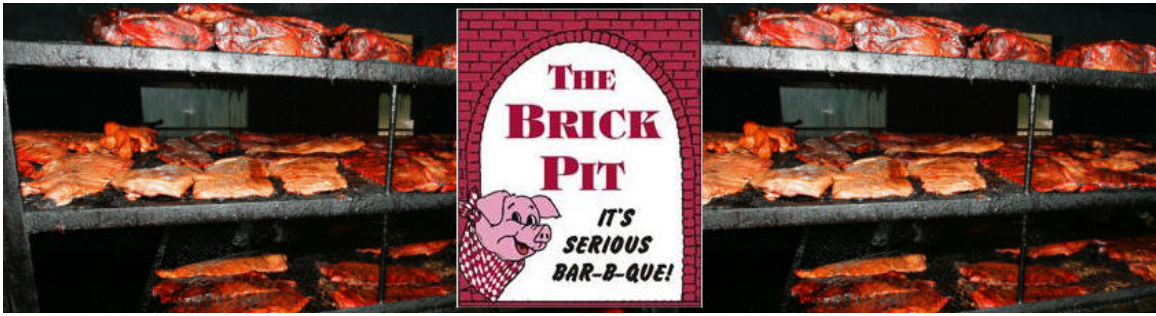
"There's a couple of other things in there, too. It's made totally from scratch," he said.

The special sauce is prepared in 5-gallon batches that are cooked in a special Dutch oven section of the barbecue pit. It has to be done this way because the restaurant - an old house - contains no oven or cooking surface at all, Bill said. Even the baked beans are cooked inside the smoky pit.

The other key element in the mix are the ribs. All of the Brick Pit's ribs are classified as "31/2 and down," which simply means a slab is 31/2 pounds or less. It generally denotes a more tender spare rib. It's all very technical, but in the final analysis, what makes the Brick Pit's ribs stand out is the long, slow cooking time and the sauce.

Also worth mentioning is the banana pudding, Mrs. Iona Waits' banana pudding, to be specific.

"Mrs. Waits comes in every day and makes the pudding; it's almost got a life of it's own," Bill said.



In his travels across the South, Rink said he's determined that there are few universal truths when it comes to ribs. Everybody does it differently, everything from rubs to sauces and beans to slaw. But in the final analysis, they're all unique.

When it comes to the **Brick Pit**, Bill says their special way is the old-fashioned way.

"We do everything slowly, just like you should do it," he said.