



BBQ RIBS AND CHICKEN



BEEF WELLINGTON



PIZZA

THE OTHER SIDE

BY BRYCE PARKS

It's always a special treat to discover magical food spots that most people don't know about, and the Other Side in East Dubuque, IL certainly fits the bill. It's a dive bar and doesn't pretend to be anything else. But it's also a special place because its owner, Mike Meyer, loves what he does, and lately, what he does is cook good food.

Mike and his sister, Michelle Mulgrew, cut their teeth cooking at Julien Inn (now known as Hotel Julien Dubuque) as teenagers back in the day, and somehow the stress of wedding banquets and packed Sunday mornings in the Alte Glocke didn't burn them out.

From day one after opening his bar in East Dubuque in 2000 (across the street from where it is now) Mike has been cooking food for Cubs games and specials events at the bar and just giving it away to loyal patrons. Meyer says that Tom Bertjens from Valet Foods taught him everything he needed to know about smoking meats in large quantities. Mike wasn't doing it for a business then, just as a favor for friends. Mike was the guy people called when they had a special food needed for a party or an event.

"The health department called and said I needed a food license to sell food. But I wasn't selling anything. I was cooking it for other people for free. So it was legal, but we opened a place across the street in 2006 and got the license to starting doing catering for real."

Three years after Mike opened, his dad, who was a longtime owner of the Hi-Hat Bar in Dubuque (and East Dubuque before that), closed his bar (now The Hub) and said he wanted to come work for Mike. Mike was already turning the back room into a motorcycle bar. Halfway through the remodel, they changed direction and his dad opened a country bar with live country music every Friday and Saturday, and it was packed all the time. It was a great father-son partnership,

"Until 2010 when my dad had a stroke, the food thing was something we did for fun on the side, not for a real business. The nighttime bar business was where the money was."

With the growth of the East Dubuque Cruisin' Thursdays car shows, so too did Mike's famous buffets start to grow.

"The classic car shows started about 10 years ago, and we started doing slices of pizza when the bar was across the street. When we came over to this location, I thought 'what about a meal?' We started serving 150 people each car show off a cobbled together buffet of roasters and crockpots. And the health department came again and said 'you can't really do it that way.' So we made the investment in a real buffet table and up to last year, we've been serving 200 people every Thursday night at the car shows."

With that overwhelming success, Mike was led to wonder if he could repeat that more often with consistent lunch buffets and specials. "I bought the property nextdoor to expand the bar eventually and thought that would be a good place for a kitchen. One day we were sitting here watching a Cubs game, and I said 'let's go,' and we started cutting holes in the wall and wham, we had a kitchen!"

"I knew I wanted to do comfort foods like you'd get for dinner at home and serve them for lunch."

Very affordable, fast, good food for working people. And since July 2018, that's exactly what Mike and Michelle have been doing. With each passing week, they keep getting more and more adventurous. That's how 365ink took note. We started lunching there after we saw Mike posting photos of the specials they were running. It wasn't just goulash and beef tips and noodles (which

are great too), but we were seeing photos of Korean beef short ribs with cauliflower t, ahi tuna steaks, quiche lorraine, and even beef wellington. Not even kidding. And the prices are simply stupid. We've never seen a lunch special over \$8. That includes the short ribs and the Friday seafood buffet. It feels like robbery actually. Someone needs to tell this guy how to turn a profit already!

"It's fun to learn to do those things and have people double take a say 'at the Other Side?... THAT'S what they're doing?'" That was our exact response as well. We've been back a good dozen times since our first trip this winter. Like many, we follow Mike Meyer and the Other Side on Facebook ([facebook.com/OSINEAST](https://www.facebook.com/OSINEAST)) and can see photos of what the lunch specials will be either the day before or earlier the day of, decided it that's something we want to go try, or go have again. You could also call for the specials. It's like a fun surprise each day to see what's in store. Often it's simple, familiar, hearty, comfort foods in large quantities, like a pasta buffet with numerous sauces and meats to accompany a couple varieties of pasta plus veggies and bread—all you can eat, of course. But other times it's plated chicken marsala, chicken cordon bleu, or fish tacos. Or a choice between things like stuffed peppers or carbonara with pancetta or how about either beer battered cod and mac and cheese or, get this, "Atlantic salmon, stuffed with seafood, carrot, squash and zucchini with a vegetable salad of broccoli, cabbage, Brussels sprouts, kale, chicory, dried cranberries, roasted pumpkin seeds and a poppy seed dressing." I know, it's nuts. At least it's nuts being served this bellied up to the bar in a dive bar. And we love it.

"Anytime we do big steak things and seafood stuff is extra fun for me. When I go out to eat, I



LONDON BROIL



SHORT RIB



CHICKEN CORDON BLEU



LENT BUFFET

order stuff I can't make. I want to learn how to make those things now and serve them in a dive bar."

Eventually Mike would like to be able to offer big Sunday buffets that are a destination for people, but he's still working up to that.

During Lent, the Friday seafood buffet has been doing killer business. During our visit, it was an all-you-can-eat spread that had beer battered cod, fried catfish and shrimp as well as baked salmon plus both seafood chowder and lobster bisque. Plus seafood pasta, lasagna, potatoes, vegetable medley, french fries, and rolls. And it was eight freaking dollars.

"When you learn in a traditional place, it's all about consistency with a set menu, and we have menus, but I think the fun part for me and what keeps me wanting to do it all the time is learning to cook new things. Just from working in the kitchen nonstop for a year and being confident, everything is just better and better each time we serve it."

"You are going to be judged by every person now. When you're putting out a roaster and it's free, nobody cares. They just eat their food and watch the game. When you serve lunch and serve each person individually, you notice everything. I see what comes back. Do they not eat vegetables or do they not like these vegetables? I worry and second guess myself. But it's a learning thing, and mostly I need to stop stressing about that."

Mike should worry less. If he's getting food back it's probably because people just can't eat it all. But they do seem to love it. Occasionally people will see the special, call ahead and order so many to go that he sells out before the lunch rush hits. But it's ok. He has a menu too, sort of. Well, we never saw one, but he said one exists.

In truth, you can just tell him what you're hungry for and he can probably make it for you. Seriously! They actually sell more pizzas than anything, and people love them. They have coney dogs that are made from the famous recipe given to them by Louie Mihalakis at the old Airport Inn where they were legendary. They also have Chicago-style hot dogs everyday, Italian beef, wings, and appetizers, "and people always say they can't believe how good our burgers are." But if you really want an omelette at 4 p.m., just ask. If Mike has time, you'll get one.

For years the Other Side opened from 11 p.m. to 3 a.m., just four hours for the bar crowd. So this is

very different. Now they are open 11 a.m. to 3:30 a.m. everyday. The bar really has two lives: lunch and night-time. There are some very stern, even rude service signs behind the bar that are so no-B.S. that they are funny. They're not crude or vulgar, but they are for real. But they are also for the 2 a.m. crowd and were well-earned by years of drunk and disorderly patrons. The service you get at lunch is decidedly different. But still, never order a long island iced tea at the Other Side or it will cost you \$20. Why? Because it's a complicated drink and only rude drunks order them when the bar is very busy. Ha!

Before 9 p.m., kids are actually welcome, and during events like the car shows, they get tons of kids. In fact, for the car show buffet, they don't even charge kids to eat. That's how loose and easy going things are at the Other Side. And the car show buffets are huge. They're impressively long.

Mike seems to have a problem charging people for his food. They always have customer appreciation on Tuesdays with free t-shirts and a free buffet. Yeah, you heard right. Free food on Tuesdays at the Other Side except on holidays. Most places have customer appreciation events once a year, the Other Side does it once a week. Mike was recently told that they've given away over 44,000 t-shirts since they started the tradition. For Fat Tuesday, they ship in crawdads to boil, and they served alligator on New Year's.

"It's kind of like the casinos; we look at food as loss leaders. If we can break even on some of these food events and lunches where the price we charge is a wash, it's an investment in growing our business and getting new people to come in to a dive bar in East Dubuque. Our goal is creating new customers. And then when we do the big things, like our New Year's event, it's \$50 but the people know what kind of quality they're going to get for their money."

Mike is also insanely active in the promotion of the East Dubuque community, working with the East Dubuque Greater Events Foundation (EDGE), the East Dubuque Lions Club, Warriors Booster Club, and more to create events, raise funds, and promote the general betterment of the city. If there's a major event happening in East Dubuque, Mike and the Other Side are probably supporters or organizers.

The bar is open from 11 a.m. to 3:30 a.m. everyday. You will find a new lunch special 11 a.m.-2 p.m., Monday

through Friday. There's the free buffet on Tuesdays, the classic car show buffet every Thursday night from May 9 through Sept. 26, and then whenever else Mike is there, you can order off "the menu" such as it is.

"If I'm not here, there's no food," says Mike. But realistically, Mike is there a lot. Sunday, Monday, and Wednesday from 11 a.m. to 3 a.m., Mike is always there. Basically the only time there's really no food is on Saturday, which may seem odd, but most everyone and their brother are happy to serve you food on Saturday and Mike would rather be watching his kids play sports. You gotta have priorities. Mike's seem to be in the right place. ☒

THE OTHER SIDE

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FACEBOOK.COM/OSINEAST

Bar Hours: Daily: 11 AM-3:30 AM

Lunch Specials: Mon-Fri: 11 AM-2 PM

Details on other food hours in the last two paragraphs of the story. It's complicated.

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DO YOU HAVE A FAVORITE RESTAURANT YOU WOULD LIKE TO SEE US VISIT? PLEASE SEND US YOUR REQUESTS, SUGGESTIONS AND COMMENTS!

EMAIL: DINING@DUBUQUE365.COM