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BBQ STATE OF MIND

Returning to normal at Brett's BBQ Shop

The coronavirus pandemic exposed many strengths and weaknesses in the restaurant industry, especially in the barbecue business. For instance, those barbecue joints that had an established to-go business during normal times had a head start when dining rooms closed last spring.



J.C. REID

Location was also a factor. Last year I wrote about Feges BBQ in Greenway Plaza. This location in a busy office-complex food court was a boon in normal times but introduced many challenges when everyone started working from home.

When dining rooms reopened at limited capacity, the size of the restaurant began to factor in. Big, spacious dining rooms allowed more tables to be seated, thus increasing capacity and income.

This is not the case at Brett's BBQ Shop in Katy. Brett's dining room is about the size of a standard living room, with no more than five tables. Again, this is a blessing in normal times because it engenders a friendly neighborhood atmosphere, and a curse in pandemic times because it limits the number of tables that can be used.

I always compare Brett's to the Boston bar in the classic TV sitcom "Cheers." It's a hole-in-the-wall spot populated by locals and regular customers "where everybody knows your name."

The experience at Brett's is just as important as the world-class barbecue that owner and pitmaster Brett Jackson serves five days a week. It's a throwback to the days when the counter person would see a regular customer come through the door and have their order ready by the time they got to the cash register.

But it's not just locals who experience the hospitality at Brett's. General manager Jacqueline Herrera both takes orders (from customers) and barks orders (to staff) while running a tight ship and greeting everyone with a friendly hello and smile.

When dining rooms closed in



Photos by J.C. Reid / Contributor

Brett's BBQ Shop in Katy opened its dining room to full capacity May 5.

March 2020, Brett's switched to an all-curbside model, like most restaurants. It never had a take-out system before, so it quickly transitioned to a process that was foreign, both from a technical and hospitality standpoint.

When restaurants were allowed to open at limited capacity some months later, Brett's small dining room made it impossible. It could have only one or two tables available, which wasn't economically viable.

So, in the interest of protecting

the health of staff and customers, it continued with the take-out-only system.

More than a year on, Brett's reopened its dining room to full capacity on May 5. Before the doors opened, the locals began lining up outside.

"It's great to see familiar faces and talk with the customers," says Jackson. "It's part of the experience here."

A few changes have been made. There are a couple of tables outside on the sidewalk

for anyone still reticent about eating indoors. The requisite plexiglass separates diners from the kitchen and ordering area. And a few additional counter seats have been added to accommodate Houstonians and Katyites clamoring for a return to normal.

Fortunately, what passes for normal at Brett's is some of the best barbecue in Greater Houston. Jackson still cooks on a 40-year-old, offset steel barrel pit known as "The Beast."

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Brett's BBQ Shop

606 Mason, Katy, 281-392-7666
Open 11:30am till sold out Wednesday-Sunday
Call ahead for availability.
Parking is limited during busy hours.

Jackson learned the craft while working at the legendary Louie Mueller Barbecue in Taylor, and his Central Texas-style barbecue is represented by a version of the classic salt-and-pepper brisket for which that style is known. Indeed, everything on the menu is house-made, from the all-beef sausage made from brisket trimmings to the crispy and acidic cilantro-jalapeño coleslaw.

As the smell of post oak wafted through the dining room and Jackson greeted customers from behind the chopping block, a sense of normalcy returned.

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Before the doors opened, locals lined up.



Brett's serves Central Texas-style brisket.



Jacqueline Herrera and Brett Jackson

SOCIETY DIARIES

Symphony wine dinner raises funds for HISD program

By Amber Elliott

STAFF WRITER

By night's end, the Houston Symphony's 20th anniversary wine dinner and auction had raised a record \$601,000. Quite the accomplishment considering this year's "Joie de Vivre: A Celebration of Wine and Music" at the Astorian had just over 200 guests – some 120 fewer than in 2020.

The César E. Chávez High School feeder pattern is one beneficiary of those funds. Its goal is to create a robust system of music education within Houston ISD, beginning with Chávez students. About 95 percent are economically disadvantaged; 78 percent are Hispanic, and 21 percent are Black.

The symphony plans to replicate the string-orchestra program that was established at Lewis Elementary in 2018 at two other elementary schools in 2022 and 2025. By 2028, the plan is to have three, full elementary school string programs, which feed into Ortiz Middle School and then Chávez High School.

COVID-19 briefly interrupted the Chávez feeder pattern's 10-year plan. Symphony staff members responded by organizing a drive-in instrument-pickup day at Lewis Elementary with 30 students receiving violins to continue their practice throughout the pandemic.

John Mangum – the Margaret Alkek Williams executive director/CEO chair of Houston Symphony – said money raised at the Wine Dinner & Collector's Auction will fund community-embedded



Photos by Gary Fountain / Contributor

Drs. Warren and Rachel Ellsworth



Gia Kenner and Sean Jamieson



Ann and Jonathan Ayre



Rubens Franz, from left, Elia Gabbanelli, Bernie Cantu and Rosangela Capobianco

musicians, in addition to the Chávez feeder pattern's string instruments and string-instrument instruction.

"We typically bring in \$2.5 million from our three signature

events: Opening Night, Symphony Ball and the Wine Dinner. Our community engagement and education programs cost \$6 million annually," he explained. "Those are audiences that we

don't necessarily serve with our Jones Hall concerts. When we look at a map at our ticket buyers and partner with the Mayor's Office of Cultural Affairs, we can see there are neighborhoods that

are not served. These programs reach people from all age groups, from pre-K to senior citizens."

It's been a big week for the symphony on the philanthropy front. On Thursday, the organization and Rice University's Shepherd School of Music announced a new pilot program: the Shepherd School-Houston Symphony Foundation Community-Embedded Musician Fellowship. One student from Rice's graduate program will be awarded the fellowship annually; he or she will apprentice under the guidance of Symphony Community Embedded musicians and community-engagement staffers to learn how to best work with children and residents from underserved communities. The fellowship aligns with the Shepherd School's newly formed task force, Musicians United for Social Equality, which is designed to engage with young musicians from underrepresented groups.

The latter strikes a chord with Ann and Jonathan Ayre, chairs of this year's Wine Dinner & Collector's Auction.

"I grew up playing the cello, so I've always had a passion for music. I started at a young age," said Ann, a 2020 Houston Chronicle Best Dressed honoree. "Right before lockdown, Jonathan said I should pick up my cello again and practice while we're all at home."

Both husband and wife have been attending Houston Symphony concerts since childhood. They've supported the organization as a couple since 2006.

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