



BOSS WITH THE SAUCE

By Louise Wollman

Checking in at a new port is at best a bother, at worst a bureaucratic ordeal. But this mid-December day in 1999, the wait in St. John was especially exasperating. A long line of sailors, cruisers, charter-boat captains and cruise ship envoys waving passenger manifests. Concurrently, when hitting Cruz Bay, I'd been struck by an intoxicating smoky aroma: the maddening sweet smell of something fine sizzling somewhere nearby. And a bossy gauntlet of officialdom blocking my path to what was gonna be great barbecue. Unmistakably.

I nearly flooded the ink off our painstakingly corrected entry forms, just about drowned the immigration officer in drool before finally being released to prowl.

A twitching nose led me straight to Uncle Joe's, a funky, yellow picket-fenced bungalow across from the post office with a steel chimney belching the bouquet of barbecue. The sign, which blew away during some hurricane long ago, is hardly necessary: most everyone gets to Uncle Joe's by dint of nose—or by word of mouth.

These frenetic events transpired eight years ago. Little did I know, it

was just the start of my obsession with Uncle Joe.

Initially, it was enough to finally plant my face around one of his ribs. No wimpy baby backs, these were four, five big meaty pork ribs. The flesh falls off the bone exactly when you want it to—onto your fork or directly into your mouth. Not merely marinated in the kicky house-made barbecue sauce, but encrusted—nearly caramelized—after many loving bastings and rigorous turnings on the grill.

The bungalow interior is a grill, an order counter, a prep area and maybe five or six plastic tables; so you sit

**Sailing On Your Stomach:
In the wake of an insatiable food sleuth**



A trip to one of the Eastern Caribbean's best BBQ joints

at least until they reach their cars.

The chicken—a leg, thigh, wing and some breast meat (\$8.95)—comes moist and similarly coated in the ambrosial sauce. Chicken-and-rib combo platters (\$10.95) are possible, but according to my credo, why swap even a single rib for a mere chicken thigh? Steaks (\$13.95) are available, but trust me—go to Ruth Chris for steak. Everything's a dollar more at dinner and each platter comes with two sides—lusty salads made daily on site, like crunchy coleslaw, no-mush macaroni and not-too-mayonnaisey potato. Corn suffers from overlong submersion in hot water.

During the next few Eastern Caribbean seasons, I regularly introduced newbie cruisers and visiting amigos to Uncle Joe's delights. To rave reviews.

Sometimes I'd fall into a quasi-meditative state admiring the griller's paintbrush technique—more or less requiring the arms of Shiva and the patience of Job. Searing, smearing, pressing, painting. Lifting, peeking, poking, coating. Rotating, tucking, slathering. And the final tong-play accorded every rib-slab and chicken-quarter: a full-body bath in the simmering saucepot.

So besotted was I that I'm not even sure I was first to ask, "So is there an Uncle Joe?"

Apparently, yes.

Suddenly I wanted to meet the guy, this Pied Piper who leads hordes of the hungry by their noses all through the town.

"No, I'm not Joe," said the genial guy behind the barbecue, flip-

ping a drippy rib package onto his chopping block, whacking through the bones, scooping them into a divided Styrofoam takeout box, then re-filling his grill.

"Well when will he be in?"

"Dunne, mebbe later. He don't keep to much of a schedule."

Clearly the bosomy, henna-haired young lady who sometimes took orders, sometimes filled in on the grill was also not Uncle Joe.

"I'd like to interview him for a magazine story," I said another year later, convinced I now had irresistible bait to dangle. "Can you give me his phone number?"

Thus began the begging.

"Not today, call back tomorrow," said the disembodied voice, meek but stonily implacable. "Off to St Thomas" ... "Too busy" ... "Meeting a guy with a backhoe" ... "Maybe next year."

The thought, "Witness Protection Program?" did pass through my head.

But steely persistence (not to mention an unholy quantum of barbecue sauce) runs in my blood. In 2008, I even got abject...to no avail. And then, finally, mad.

"Maybe tomorrow," the voice said. When pressed, "Well, maybe around 2."



focused hungrily on the barbecue—not a whole lot bigger than your boat's Magma, but piled high with par-cooked, pre-marinated piles of chicken and ribs.

You wait hopefully and—at peak times—helplessly, wondering which of the order tickets is yours, when its time will come and why it's taking so long.

Why? First because "you're on island time, mon." You will be subjected to this Caribbean lesson again and again till you surrender and learn it. Second, at Uncle Joe's, it ain't done until de griller say so. And third, because smart call-inners and take-outers—the land-based or beach-bound—order in advance, show up at the pickup counter with uncanny accuracy, avoid tedious waits, and do not besmirch or be-slaver their shirts,



I showed up at 11, before opening, and peeked in.

"Are YOU Uncle Joe?" I asked a bespectacled guy chopping cabbage for slaw.

The voice would have given him away anyway.

"Now can I interview you?" Maybe too triumphantly.

"Oh no, too much prep work. Maybe later...say around 5."

But we were leaving for St Martin at 3. To my husband—only—I admitted defeat.

"Let's wait and maybe get one more rib lunch outta this ordeal."

We returned at 1. A ready fire, but no griller, no customers.

1:20. "What's up?" I asked Henna-Hair.

I heard, "We're waitin' on the

sauce." "We're waitin' on the Boss," my husband heard.

At 2pm, in trudged both: the man I now knew as Joe, bearing four five-gallon jars of sauce and taking over the grill.

Talking while he worked? Verboten.

"Can I at least take a few pictures and then call you tomorrow?" I whined.

"But I'm not even wearing my apron," he protested.

I stopped asking and simply shot. But if you're wondering why they're blurry.

Eventually I got five Skype minutes. Uncle Joe turns out to be just like his sauce—mild, but with a bit of kick, enthusiastic in a sly way. He was born in Anguilla, raised

in St. Thomas and St. John, pretty much amid the embers—his dad a pit-barbecue man. He opened Uncle Joe's in 1990; its name had evolved naturally:

"I had quite a few nieces and nephews. Often when they had birthday parties and graduations and such, I'd make the beach or backyard barbecue. 'Uncle Joe'll be doin' the barbecue,' they'd say to their friends. Soon everyone was calling me Uncle Joe."

He won't abide labels like Texas or Tennessee—calls it "good old, down-home Virgin Island BBQ."

Okay by me.

Uncle Joe's is open weekdays 11:45am to 9pm, weekends 1pm to 8:30pm, seven days a week year-round. Closed only Christmas Day, New Year's Day and Good Friday.

"Have a great day and a blessed week," he said in closing.

Dinghy into Cruz Bay, park next to the ferry dock.

Follow your nose. ≈

*Uncle Joe's BBQ
Across from the Post Office
North Shore Rd
Cruz Bay, St John
US Virgin Islands*