

BARBECUE, CENTRAL COAST STYLE

By Jacquelyn Wells

“Deja Moo is what it is like,” said my friend, Bill, when I explained my reason for a return visit to the Santa Maria Valley. I grew up here and on this trip I planned to indulge myself by dining at three of the oldest restaurants employing the techniques of the Santa Maria Style Barbecue. There are many reasons to visit the Central Coast of California; this is just one of the most delicious.

The traditional menu, ©1978, starts with aged meat, specifically “Top Sirloin of Beef, Choice Grade, Cut 3 inches thick.” This is cooked over native red oak flamed to a white center. Only salt, pepper and garlic season the slabs of the corn-fed meat. A tossed salad; French bread heated on the grill and drenched with butter; a side of pinquito beans, a pint-sized pink bean produced solely in this valley; a spoonful of tart salsa; macaroni and cheese; coffee and a simple desert complete the rest of the feast.

According to R.H. Tesene in his book, Santa Maria Style Barbecue, this method of cooking was probably passed down from the indigenous Chumash Tribe to the Spanish Vaqueros. Then the Santa Maria Club borrowed the technique in 1931 -- skewering the meat on long rods layered over the pit. Later a host of other restaurants imitated the club, led by Tesene’s own Beacon Outpost in 1952. Nowadays these restaurants vary the menu slightly and offer other entrees and vegetables, but the barbecued meat is clearly the star.

The Hitching Post in Casmalia is twelve miles southwest of Santa Maria. Having opened their pit in 1944, they claim that theirs was “the first oak wood bar-b-que restaurant in the area”. On this trip, my mother, two brothers, one sister-in-law and I

undertook the difficult task of testing their claim of serving the “World’s Best Bar-B-Q Steaks”.

Set in the middle of a one-car town that tosses you back into the old west, the elderly structure housing the Hitching Post does not broadcast a delicious fare. In fact, its dark interior may cause some fear in the taste buds of a novice to this territory. Ancient dining room tables and chairs outfit the room that sports just a tiny wooden bar. Deer and moose heads populate walls burned with cattle brands. Take heart and take another look. Notice the huge indoor pit. Trust the New York Steak, their signature cut. It is a sweet, salty, smoky, seductive steak that virtually melts in your mouth.

The Ostini Family has owned the Hitching Post since 1967. Currently, brother Frank owns the Hitching Post II in Buelton, which opened in 1986. Brother Bill owns the one in Casmalia.

We began to lose people the next night. Clearly the challenge was too strenuous for the weak of stomach. We lost brother Patrick and his wife, Mari. My mother, Pat, and brother, Chuck, added friends Bill and Gayle and Aunt Barbara to round out our table at the Far Western Tavern in Guadalupe. Guadalupe is about ten miles northwest of Santa Maria. It is bigger than Casmalia’s four blocks, but just barely. While Casmalia drops you back in time, this one pushes you into another country—Mexico. Across the street and down the block from the tavern is a movie theater, showing only Mexican or Spanish movies. Mexican words title the stores and restaurants of this dozy village.

Far Western’s co-founder, Clarence Minetti boasts that his place is “Where the pavement ends and the west begins.” Once inside the 86-year-old brick building a long, dark bar greets us on our way to the bright, spacious dining room. Cow hides curtain the

windows adding to the traditional heads and brands on the wall. In this backdrop one can visualize the ghosts of deceased farmers and cowhands as one sits among their modern counterparts. The menu's variety, highlighting local produce and offering such unusual starters as "sweet tumbleweed onion" nudges this tavern into the modern age. Their best effort, called the Bull's Eye Steak, is from the eye of the prime rib. The memory of each tender morsel's tasty flavor makes my mouth water.

Far Western's history sheet informs us that Minetti and Dick Maretti bought the establishment in 1958 and it is still in the Minetti family. In the old days, the steaks came from Minetti's Corralitos Ranch. Now they come from local suppliers.

My brother, Chuck, and I were the only ones left for the last sitting at Jocko's Restaurant. Jocko's is located in Nipomo, about ten miles north of Santa Maria on Highway 101. Nipomo is on a growth hormone, still trying to find its charm. It's just now realizing its beauty and attraction—like a young girl checking out the mirror for the first time and noticing the looks of men as she walks by.

Just like the other restaurants, Jocko's' concrete structure does not announce the delicious food it serves, but the bouquet from the outdoor pit does. Waiting for Chuck in the saloon, I soak in the masculine atmosphere. Jocko's has the regulation animal heads and cattle brands.

We sit on the left-side dining room so we can see the pit. The place is packed with people. All of these places are busy, but Jocko's never stops. Jocko's menu is definitely the most traditional. Anything from the pit is delicious, but I always order the same thing, the pork chops—two incredible hunks of perfectly cooked monsters. Once cooked, they are an inch to an inch and a half thick and four to five inches wide. Now

you might think that pork so thick would be dry. Not so. They are moist, a perfectly seared-in seasoned sensation. My brother's invariable New York Steak was barbecue magic.

The Knotts family owns Jocko's. According to their menu, they have owned a saloon here since Emery Knotts' first place in 1886. One of his sons, Jocko, ran a bar until he died in 1952. Two of his sons, George and Fred, carried on the tradition and opened the restaurant in his name in 1956. Fred's widow, Sandy and son, Mike now run the place. Its location, positioned between Los Angeles and San Francisco just off Highway 101, has made it a prized stopping place since the late 1950's.

You can find oak-barbecued meat at some restaurants in Santa Maria, of course, and in other local towns. On weekends you can purchase slices of tri-tip (a triangular cut of the sirloin devised by a Larry Viegas, a Santa Maria butcher) from fund raising groups at Santa Maria parking lots. The Santa Maria Elks Lodge No. 1538 and other lovers of the red oak emblazoned meat carry on the tradition as traveling road shows, bringing everything with them, including their pits.

However, if you wish to experience the best version of this style of cooking, I recommend that you get off the beaten path and head for Casmalia, Guadalupe or Nipomo.

As for which one fires up the best steak, I think I better leave that one alone, my family still lives there. The locals all have their favorites. The other burning issue is what is it that makes the special taste, the seasoning or the red oak smoke. Personally, I think it's both, but I'll let you decide.

IF YOU GO

* **GETTING THERE:** Santa Maria is the northern most city in Santa Barbara County, just south of San Luis Obispo. It is about 270 miles south of San Francisco on Highway 101. If you have the extra time, Highway 1 is a beautiful way to get there.

the Hitching Post, 3325 Point Sal Road, Casmalia, CA 93429; phone: (805) 937-6151; web page: www.beststeaks.com. Take Highway 101 south to the Betteravia Exit (south Santa Maria), turn left heading west. Turn left at Mahoney Road, this turns into Black Road. Turn right at Point Sal Road heading into Casmalia. The Hitching Post is on left side of the street. Distance is about 16 miles. Entrees are \$13.95 to \$30.95.

Far Western Tavern, 899 Guadalupe Street, Guadalupe, CA 93434; phone: (805) 343-2211; fax: (805) 343-6846; web page: www.farwestern.wrk4u.com. Take Highway 101 south to the Main Street Exit of Santa Maria. Go west on East Main Street toward Highway 166 (East Main becomes Highway 166) After 9 miles turn right on Highway 1 heading into town. Guadalupe Street is the main street. Distance is about 10 miles. Prices range from \$13.00 to \$33.25 for meat, \$43.95 for Lobster.

Jocko's, 125 N. Thompson Avenue, Nipomo, CA 93444; phone: (805) 929-3686. Nipomo is about ten miles north of Santa Maria off Highway 101. Take the Tefft Street/Nipomo Exit and head east for about 1/2 mile to Thompson Avenue. Jocko's is on the corner. Entrees from the pit are \$9.75 (for sausage) to \$22.00. Extra cuts of steak are \$5.50 more.

* **WHERE TO STAY:** The Kaleidoscope Inn, 130 East Dana Street, Nipomo, CA 93444; phone: (805) 929-5444. Bed and Breakfast at 100-year old Victorian mansion. Rooms, including breakfast, are \$90.00 for two. The gazebo garden is available for weddings. Owner Patty Linane told me that most guests dine at Jocko's.

Spyglass Inn, 2705 Spyglass Drive, Pismo Beach, CA 93449; phone: (800) 824-2612 or (805) 773-5298; web page: www.spyglassinn.com. Pismo Beach is 9 miles north of Nipomo. Room prices vary from \$59.00 - \$189.00.

Holiday Inn, 2100 N. Broadway, Santa Maria, CA; phone: (805) 928-6000. Rates are from \$78.00 to \$148.00.

* **WHERE TO EAT LUNCH:** Little Jocko's, Frontage Road, Nipomo, CA; phone (805) 929-3885. Head west off Tefft Street Exit in Nipomo. Turn left at Frontage Road, Little Jocko's is on the right. Owned by another of Jocko's sons, Dick Knotts and family. Serves old-fashioned hamburger stand food. Tacos at \$1.35, burgers at \$1.80 and a gallon of Jocko's beans for \$6.50.

* **WHAT TO DO:**

Wine tasting: The wine industry has made its mark in the Central Coast.

Breakaway Tours, 1308 Broad Street, Number 27, San Luis Obispo, CA 93401; phone: (800) 799-7657 or (805) 783-2929. Offers wine tasting, sightseeing, and Hearst Castle tours. Tours are custom designed so prices vary according to needs and budget.

Contact Pismo Beach Chamber of Commerce, phone: (800) 433-7778 or (805) 773-4382; web page: www.pismochamber.com; email: pbcofc@fix.net.

Or Arroyo Grande Chamber of Commerce, 800 W. Branch Street, Arroyo Grande, CA 93420; phone: (805) 489-1488 for Edna Valley Wineries.

Further south, contact Santa Barbara County Vintners' Association, PO Box 1558, Santa Ynez, CA 93460-4558; phone: (800) 218-0881 or (805) 688-0881; fax: (805) 686-5881, for Santa Barbara County's vineyard listing.

Golf: Black Lake Golf Course, 1490 Golf Course Lane, Nipomo, CA 93444; phone: (805) 343-1214; fax: (805) 343-6317; web page: www.blacklake.com. Fees range from \$13.00 to \$65.00 depending on the time, day or your membership affiliation.

Pismo Beach Golf Course, Le Sage Drive (near Highway 1 and Grande Avenue), Grover Beach, CA 93433. Walk-ins only. Prices from \$4.25 to \$7.25.

Outdoors: Nipomo Dunes Preserve, Guadalupe. From Santa Maria 8 miles west on Main Street (Highway 166). Picnic, hike or whale watch. Currently archaeologists are excavating the massive Egyptian movie set used in Cecil B. DeMille's 1923 epic, The Ten Commandments. Exhibits can be seen at the Dunes Discovery Center in Guadalupe (down the street from the Far Western Tavern).

For more ideas and information: Santa Maria Valley Visitor and Convention Bureau, 614 S. Broadway, Santa Maria, CA 93454; phone: (805) 331-3779; fax: (805) 928-7559; web page: www.santamaria.com; email: smvcc@santamaria.com.

Pismo Beach is the perfect place to stay or just hang out for a day. Check out this web site for other surf, ATV, sightseeing or dining ideas. Web page: www.pismo-beach.com.

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