

Ruby's Brisket B-B-Q  
512 West 29th St.  
477-1651

I don't want you to get the wrong idea about Ruby's. I mean, if I told you about a campus area barbecue joint that serves black beans and plays Charlie Parker records, you'd probably write it off as some kind of strange yuppie hybrid, wouldn't you? Pretentious and effete, right? But you'd be wrong because Ruby's does both of these things AND serves up righteous backroads barbecue without missing a beat.

In fact, Ruby's is an anomaly. It's the country-bred intellectual who can quote Jean-Paul Sartre or kick off a two-step with equal abandon. It's a place that bridges the gap between small town Texas and big city erudition and makes it look easy. It's grad student ethic meets Bubba's cafe . . . and sometimes when worlds collide, they actually improve. After all, there aren't many barbecue joints where you'd feel comfortable chewing over a Camus paperback along with your ribs.

None of which was what we were expecting when we wandered into Ruby's on a cold Sunday night last week. Housed in the former Fajita Flats building on the north end of the Drag, Ruby's smallish interior is done in a low-key southwestern style with white-scrubbed walls, tile floors and simple tile-topped tables. Strings of dried chilies and whitened cattle skulls adorn the walls — and though I'm not quite comfortable eating in view of my late dinner's cranium. Georgia O'Keeffe would undoubtedly approve.



Ruby's owners Patricia Mares and Luke Zimmerman

## The Existential Brisket

By S. Emerson Moffat

Ruby's adheres to that fine old barbecue tradition of quasi-self service: you give your order at the counter and then take a table while a server brings you your food. They were out

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of ribs the night we visited, but through judicious selection (read: piggery) we managed to take a crack at nearly all the major menu items and found not a loser in the bunch. The Choice

Granada Brisket plate (\$4.50) offered a generous portion of sliced beef — juicy, fork-tender, and smoked to a fare-thee-well. Ditto the Elgin Hot Sausage (\$4.25) — rich peppery links sliced into toothsome nuggets. And the Fresh Barbecue Chicken (\$4.95/half, \$4.25/quarter), often a throwaway item on most menus, was really a plate-licker here: crackling skin housing plump, moist, well-smoked meat, nearly falling off the bone in its tenderness.

Still, I have to admit that my personal favorite was really the chopped beef sandwich. I know it's horribly declassé, but I actually like these things — something about that greasy orange meat juice soaking into a squishy white

bun just sets my little heart aflutter. And, of course, Ruby's has ennobled their version slightly with finely chopped sauteed onion and peppers mixed into the shredded beef. With a generous slathering of take-your-breath-away sauce (Ruby's offers two strengths — hot and mild), this lowly sandwich was truly a thing of beauty and a joy for at least the two minutes it took me to gobble it down.

Plate dinners at Ruby's come with a choice of two side dishes, which include the standard BBQ go-alongs plus a few unexpected pleasures. Though I'm not normally much of a bean fancier, the barbecued pintos here really won me over with their irresistible hot-smoked sweet act. First runner-up honors went to Ruby's Fall Cranberries, a wonderful seasonal relish of freshly stewed cranberries, oranges, and almonds, and a perfect accompaniment to the barbecued chicken. Black beans with cilantro turned in a satisfying performance, though quite a bit subtler than their pinto counterparts. And fresh chopped parsley added a grace note to the already fine potato salad featuring chunky red-skinned spuds, onion, celery, and cucumber in a light tart dressing. The coleslaw was coleslaw was coleslaw, but after all, a bohemian barbecue joint should pay its respects to Ms. Stein occasionally.

We didn't get to try the Gregory's Smoked Chicken Salad Sandwich (\$3.25) — an intriguing sounding mixture of barbecued chicken, celery, onion, almonds, mayonnaise, and spices — or the desserts, for that matter. But there'll be plenty of time for further investigation because I plan to be doing some serious eating here over the next few months (did I mention the place is walking distance from the *Chron* offices?).

In fact, as soon as the weather warms up again, you'll probably find me doing some serious research out in Ruby's tiny weathered wood beer garden. A chopped beef sandwich, a Shiner Bock, and a volume of Elizabethan sonnets? Hey, that's not strange . . . it's just *culturally well integrated*. And after all, when a place like Ruby's offers you the best of both worlds, you'd be a fool not to take it.

PHOTO BY JANE LEVINE