

KendalBen Barbeque: a new approach to an old favorite

Written by Story and Photos by Jeffrey Smith For the Sun
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VILLAGE OF MILAN– From the first smile of KendalBen’s manager John, you become aware there is something positive and new about the dining experience available at KendalBen Barbeque in Milan.

KendalBen’s serves food such as a lightly smoked Bison Burger, which might be surprising to find in Albuquerque much less a village next to Grants with 4,000 inhabitants. KendalBen’s is owned by Kendal Cash who also serves as one of two chefs. KendalBen is Cash’s nickname.

As you enter the restaurant you see an interesting mix of old and new. Traditional barbeque fans are greeted by a wall made partly of planks of weathered wood.

“The wood is from my great-grandfather’s barn in Monument, New Mexico,” Cash explains.

The wall of weathered wood is surrounded by solid designs made of hand prepared wood, metal and fabric art handcrafted by Cash at his father’s metal fabrication shop.

The attention to detail is also clear when you try the food: the large Bison Burger comes with a side of corn mixed with roasted chopped New Mexico chile. It has a full but fairly mild flavor. The bison is supplied by a Colorado company and is hormone and antibiotic free. Perhaps

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because it is grass fed it is also low in cholesterol and high in Omega 3 fatty acid which helps promote healthy hearts.

In addition, the most popular items are the pulled pork (smoked for 16 hours over oak wood) and the “Rowdy Chicken” a Kansas City-style hot breaded fillet. Racks and half-racks of ribs are available.

The restaurant serves rib-eyes and briskets of either bison or beef. All of the meat entrees other than the rib-eye steaks and chicken is smoked.

The hand created metal art and blue lights supply a cool atmosphere somewhat unexpected for the standard barbeque restaurant.

“I wanted to get away from the traditional barbeque and create a five-star dining experience in my own style of what a barbeque restaurant should be,” Cash said.

After working as a carpenter in construction and working his way up to a superintendent job Cash decided to study Culinary Arts. He entered the Art Institute in Draper, Utah and graduated in 2011 with a Bachelor’s degree. He has shared his knowledge and work ethic with a staff that provides old style good service, as I’ve found each time I’ve visited the restaurant.

For folks who are more traditional all the meats are available as tortilla wraps or in a deep fried chimichanga style.

KendalBen’s has an extra chef which makes possible a full dessert line made from scratch: Raspberry Chocolate Cheese Cake, German Chocolate Cake, Peach Cobbler and Cookies with Ice Cream.

Cash purchased a food trailer and wood smoker oven in 2011 after graduating from college. After supplying food to the Fire and Ice Bike Rally from 2011 through 2013, he opened his

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mobile restaurant with tables available under a canopy in Grants on Santa Fe Avenue from July through November 2013.

The winter weather sent him looking for a full-time restaurant location, which he found in Milan. KendalBen opened in its current location in April 2014 and now has 14 employees –10 of them full time. The building came with an existing laundry, which his wife Laura operates using her name: Laura's Laundry.

KendalBen's was the new business of the year in Grants/Milan this past year. The restaurant also won an award as part of its catering business when they served 500 people at the annual Chamber of Commerce banquet.

The friendly yet professional staff is supported with information from Cash: "I have training manuals written for every position" he said.

The original restaurant trailer sported a new and rather colorful design at the recent Fire and Ice rally. The design includes a large KB logo which is also used in the restaurant's wooden décor.

As the owner of a growing business Kendal tells his staff "If you want you can make a career out of this."

Both the manager John and my latest server, Courtney, seem to take this opportunity seriously as they were both friendly and professional.

The word has spread about KendalBen's and they have regular customers coming each month from Gallup and Albuquerque.

"Even though it is a smaller restaurant we can give you a big town experience," Cash said. His goal is "to convince them we're offering them a dining experience as good as any big city."

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One modern trend you'll notice in the restaurant is shown by the re-purposing of antique materials. Solid wood benches in the front of the restaurant, which are placed on a frame of hand done pipes, are made of wood which was originally used in his uncle's adobe home in Cubero, NM. Each bench seems a symbol of the KendalBen approach: using quality, traditional ingredients in a new way.

The restaurant is located in East Milan at 314 W. Highway 66. It is open from 10:30am – 9 pm Mon - Thurs., and until 11 pm on Friday and Saturday. Contact: (505) 287-5095.