

Exotic burger at Athens fest is for the birds



KENT BIFFLE'S TEXANA

ATHENS — Hoo-rhea for hamburgers, I guess. You've heard about ostrich and emu ranching in Texas. Well, the 6-foot, 75-pound South American rhea may be the NBB — Next Big Bird.

I had a Big Bird Burger at the Uncle Fletcher Davis Hamburger Cook-off on the Henderson County Courthouse Square in Athens last weekend.

It was a pricey dish, served up by Tom Werneking and Phil Albright, who are partners in a rhen ranch. It was pricey for them, not me.

One of their \$750 critters went AWOL, galumphed into a neighbor's field and ran a-fowl of a farmer who was mowing.

Goodbye, \$750. Hello, Big Bird Burger.

"Tastes like beef," estimated Mr. Werneking. Closer to dove or pheasant, I'd say. Whatever, it won the \$50 prize for best exotic burger of 1992.

Exactly when the bird was mowed down I don't want to know. But it was professionally preserved,



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Charmaine Pierce samples a prize-winning entry at the Athens burger bash.

marinated by Mr. Albright, who is an undertaker. Uncle Fletcher Davis (1864-1941) probably would flip over rhenburgers. He might flip over the whole shootin' "Home of the Hamburger" match.

See, the annual cook-off stems from the notion

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Some say Athens is burger's birthplace

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that Athens is the spot where Uncle Fletcher invented the hamburger. He perfected hamburgers in Athens, the story goes, and then peddled them at the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis.

A putter by trade, Uncle Fletcher didn't claim to have invented anything. The claim was made for him more than a decade ago by Frank X. Tolbert, colorful columnist for this paper, and oil millionaire Clint Murchison Jr.

The late Messrs. Tolbert and Murchison, a prankish pair, found many believers. The burghers of Athens, a town long crowned the Black-eyed Pea Capital, hoisted a historic plaque honoring Uncle Fletcher, the burgermeister. How famous can one 11,000-population city get?

The smoky yearly burger rites flourish despite doubters such as Jim Goodson, who as editor of the Athens Daily Review investigated the matter. He found three or four other towns claiming to be the cradle of the burger. Moreover, he found on the 1834 menu of a New York restaurant — Delmonico's — a suspicious-looking entree called "hamburger steak." It went for a dime.

Whether it took 70 years for some genius — namely Uncle Fletcher — to slap buns on a hamburger steak is a question that long pestered Mr. Goodson. Finally, he was faced with the question that comes eventually to all philosophers: "What's the diff?"

"Athens' claim as 'Home of the Hamburger' is hard to dispute when McDonald's Hamburger University teaches employees that Athens is the one. Records show that Uncle Fletcher had a stand on the square in Athens in the 1800s, serving his ground meat, pickle and onion sandwich. Athens citizens sent Uncle Fletcher to the 1904 World's Fair."

— Mary Lou Williams of Athens

A believer, Mary Lou Williams of Athens, informed me. "Athens' claim as 'Home of the Hamburger' is hard to dispute when McDonald's Hamburger University teaches employees that Athens is the one."

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Annual cook-off flourishes

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the 1904 World's Fair."

Last year, editor Goodson left the Review to become editor of Park Cities People/North Side People in Dallas. Despite his lapsed faith, he returned to Athens to whoop along the 1992 cook-off.

"I knew Fletcher Davis. The cook-off's a lot of bull," said C.F. Hawn of Athens, whose energetic work on the Texas Highway Commission etched his name on a Dallas freeway. When the freeway's gone, he'll be remembered as the center on the 1930 University of Texas at Austin football team that won the Southwest Conference title.

Speaking of titles, three-time champ Bryan Barber of Athens won 1992's \$50 traditional burger prize. The Athens Jaycees won \$100 for the biggest burger, a 12-pound whopper — if the Dairy Queen that sponsored the cook-off will excuse that expression. Oddly, the DQ finds the blow-out whets appetites for DQ burgers.

The Texans award for a truly celestial burger goes to Lyn Dunsavage.

And she doesn't enter the cook-off. Her advantages are obvious — an elaborate kitchen and homemade buns, fresh from the oven.

Lyn made me a classic burger at Dunsavage Farms near the settlement of New York (named for an 1800s shipping crate's return address). The spot is seven or eight miles east of Athens just off the highway to Tyler.

Creator of the Neiman-Marcus-cataloged, globally touted "New York, Texas, Cheesecake," Lyn opened her gourmet kitchen a decade ago. Selling off her Dallas Downtown News, she moved to the woods. Now Dallas comes to her.

She converted a big, red, two-story farmhouse into a bed and breakfast. Texans like the food and mood.

Breakfast's a feast. (You can even get cheesecake.) For \$7 or \$8, lunch is, well... listen to the DMN's free-wheeling Jean Simmons.

"Make it a point to be there at lunchtime. You can partake of a three-course meal that ends with the light, fluffy raison d'etre (yes, cheesecake)."

On Saturday nights, by reservation, the farm is the scene of gourmet dinners, priced at about \$20.

Sometimes Lyn invites big-name guest chefs. Recently, I had a supper fixed by Dotty Griffith, DMN food editor. Dotty makes a kitchen sing.

I saw Lyn's menu for an upcoming reservation dinner:



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Lyn Dunsavage, creator of the famous "New York, Texas, Cheesecake," also makes a fantastic burger, complete with homemade buns. She has a bed and breakfast near Athens.

Pesto with pulverized black-eyed peas and sour cream. Fresh tomato soup with parsley. Southwest Caesar salad. Pork loin with raspberry-raisin sauce or poached catfish with lime-mesquite sauce. Twice baked potatoes. Asparagus with hollandaise sauce. And — help me make it to the car — New York, Texas, Cheesecake with baba (raspberry) sauce.

Dry-iced, those cheesecakes can travel (903-675-2281).

But for traveling, Mary Lou Williams' gift baskets take the cake. Inspired by Athens' annual Black-eyed Pea Jamboree, she came up with her food brand: "Peas on Earth." Last year, between October and January, she sold tons of peas in 25 states and Europe.

She told me, "Two years ago I had only the two-pecks of black-eyed peas. Then I added a cornbread mix and, at the suggestion of Don, my husband, a tomato relish."

"I'm having a ball with this. I cook the 'JalaPEAnos,' my hot-and-sweet jalapenos. They became part of this year's gift baskets."

The Peas on Earth label is a natural for Christmas. And superstition boosts year-end sales. For New Year's dining, many Texans consider black-eyed peas a required course. The number for Peas on Earth is 1-800-767-PEAS.

Texans are blessed with delicacies. Marsha Gustafson of Texas Tech sent samples of a new green one — Jalapeno Pecan Brittle, made

by Lubbock's Windmill Candy, Inc. It's clever stuff. You bite it, and 20 seconds later it bites you.