

Experience the South by People Who Know it Best



Wines down South



QUEEN OF SOUTHERN CUISINE

Paula Deen Opens Restaurant At Harrah's Cherokee

By Doc Lawrence



Paula Deen welcomes Doc Lawrence to the opening ceremonies for her new restaurant.

CHEROKEE, NC—No right-minded Southern boy would turn down an invitation to be with Paula Deen. I left the snow and ice of Atlanta, headed to the Smoky Mountains of Western North Carolina, entering the ancient land of the Cherokee to join an auspicious celebration, a ribbon cutting ceremony for the history-making opening of Paula Deen's

Kitchen in the \$630 million Harrah's Cherokee expansion. There was some icing on the cake: I was able to dine there and even appear onstage with her.

After an earlier event with the ebullient Paula last summer in Atlanta, I began to believe that she and country music star Dolly Parton were meant to be sisters. Both have a magnetic stage presence, audiences connect with them immediately and they are talented daughters of the South who embrace their heritage. Their naturalness, easygoing manner, good-natured humor, songs and food bring joy to the masses. What you see, hear or eat is precisely what you get.

The ceremonies began with Michell Hicks, the eloquent principal chief of the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Nation joining Ms. Dean in a press conference welcome with his overview of the Harrah's expansion and the opening of what already is one of the most popular restaurants this side of Nashville and Atlanta. "We believe in risks," said Chief Hicks, "and our belief in where we wanted to go is right here with us today."

One reporter asked Ms. Deen if the new restaurant was the realization of a big dream. "Not exactly," responded Ms. Deen, one of the most accessible celebrities around. "I had little dreams. I had responsibilities, worked hard and took steps carefully. And, everything started coming together."

Following the ribbon cutting, I joined other writers for lunch in Paula Deen's Kitchen, a full-service, 404-seat restaurant serving a la carte breakfast, lunch and dinner, decorated in a style reminiscent of Savannah, Georgia. I began with a wedge iceberg lettuce blue



Paula Deen and Michell Hicks, principal chief, Eastern Band of the Cherokee Nation, open the new restaurant at Harrah's Cherokee Casino & Hotel.



Chief Michell Hicks welcomes Paula Deen at the news conference where she fielded questions with her remarkable charm and gracious humor.

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cheese and bacon salad, a Paula Deen signature dish. Following this was meat loaf (my portion would bring a smile to Henry VIII) along with the best collard greens I've had since my baby days in Grandma Stella's country kitchen. With collard greens, the magic is in the seasoning and the pot likker (a traditional folk tonic for Southerners) had enough mojo to ward off winter flu.

I joined the Food Network star along with her family and friends on stage before three thousand adoring fans, devouring Paula's filet mignon prepared with a remarkable Jack Daniel's Tennessee Whiskey gravy and sautéed mushrooms, all while she continued to cook and tease the audience. Paula's star-power sold out the event center and Harrah's donated \$25,000 proceeds to the Cherokee Indian Hospital Foundation for a Digital Mammography Unit.

The next morning meant breakfast at Paula Deen's Kitchen. It was appropriately called "The Kitchen Sink," an assemblage of pancakes, maple syrup, eggs, country sausage and ham, hot biscuits and gravy along with endless cups of good coffee.

I left filled with more than just precious memories of delicious food from this wonderful restaurant, but also with some reflections. From the moment I left my Atlanta home to travel here, I was on land that once belonged to the Cherokee people. I still feel outrage over the horrors of the Trail of Tears, an ugly scar on our country. After the infamous "Trail of Tears," this North Carolina land actually had to be

purchased and for generations the Cherokee lived under the yoke of poverty and all the ills it carries. Today, Harrah's Cherokee Casino offers more than hope. This enormous investment of private capital (with no counterpart in the South), the completed facilities, all accomplished during difficult economic times, is a testament to the working partnership between the Cherokee leaders and Harrah's that is having a beneficial ripple effect throughout this region.

There are jobs where not long ago, hopelessness and unemployment reigned. The growing economic ripple benefits cities and counties throughout Western North Carolina, East Tennessee, North Georgia and beyond. This is a magnet for new tourism, an enormous resource almost too huge to measure. Here is the very embodiment of the American Dream.

Paula Deen has teamed with Harrah's Cherokee to bring a lot of good to this land and these deserving people.

My country at her best.



The First Lady of Southern Cuisine welcomes Cherokee leaders and dignitaries during the opening ceremonies for her restaurant.



Paula Deen with her family and friends at the ribbon cutting ceremonies for her new restaurant.

