

Uniquely Texas

Texas Best Smokehouse travel centers offer homestyle barbecue in a family setting By Danielle Romano



Victron Energy wants to challenge the common misperceptions pertaining to travel centers with its Texas Best Smokehouse locations.

FOR TOO LONG, the nation's travel centers have caught a bad rap for catering only to professional drivers and providing less-than-quality gas station food. Victron Energy Inc. is challenging that misperception in the form of Texas Best Smokehouse, its travel center and convenience store arm that serves up homemade barbecue, an assortment of award-winning exotic jerky, and private brand items like gourmet snacks and candy, all in a family-oriented setting.

With locations across the Dallas/east Texas area — most of which are situated on major interstates — Texas Best Smokehouse welcomed customers to one of its newest travel centers at 101 U.S. Highway 287 South in Henrietta, Texas, on April 21. It is the eighth location in the company's portfolio.

"Our goal is to give customers, travelers, commuters, truckers — whoever they may be — a memorable Texas experience, whether that's greeting customers with, 'Howdy, welcome to Texas Best,' them tasting our delicious barbecue or our unique jerky, or buying some of our gift items. Whatever it is, we want to give people the feel and impression of what is uniquely Texas," said Mohammed Sharaf, vice president of development.

"We like to think that we take all of the elements and improve the offer and the experience that everyone can be happy with, without making any compromises," he added.



From Familiar to Exotic Offers

The Texas Best Smokehouse brand debuted less than a decade ago as the brainchild of Mohammed's father, Ali, who founded the concept with a single convenience store.

Ali was born in Syria, where he worked as a civil engineer before moving to the United States in 1986. Upon his arrival, he worked as a cashier in a c-store in a rough area of Oak Cliff, Texas. For three years, he saved his money to eventually purchase that same store.

At one point, Ali was approached by a man who wanted to lease the store, but he saw the location as a chance to create opportunity and wealth for himself and others, and envisioned a travel center that would not only appeal to truckers, but also really focus on family and commuters coming from out of state.

More than anything, Ali wanted to provide a small, family-owned and -oriented feeling that is rare for a large, statewide company, according to Mohammed.

Today, the Texas Best Smokehouse in Henrietta continues Ali's mission that these locations be not just another convenience store, but rather a unique destination.

With its facilities open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, the 17,000-square-foot travel center incorporates Texas flair with southern and western elements for an authentic feel.



At a Glance Texas Best Smokehouse

Location:

101 U.S. Highway 287
South, Henrietta, Texas

Size: 17,000 square feet

Unique features: Proprietary Texas Best BBQ; private brand jerky, fudge, candy and snacks



The 17,000-square-foot travel center incorporates many western elements for an authentic Texas feel.

This particular location features four eating establishments — all open daily until 10 p.m. — that provide customers with options from the familiar, such as Steak 'n Shake, Auntie Anne's and Cinnabon, to homestyle with the company's signature Texas Best BBQ program.

"A lot of people expect it to be gas station barbecue, but you'll find that we like to deliver a restaurant-level quality, whether you're dining in or on the go," Mohammed explained. "Often, people are coming in just to dine and enjoy the atmosphere, so we're happy to offer that as well."

Another unique element of Texas Best Smokehouse's offering is its awarding-winning jerky. The company has become known for its signature exotic jerky varieties, which span venison, bison, elk, python, kangaroo, rabbit, crocodile and crawfish. All of its jerky is produced in a facility the company owns and oversees in Italy, Texas.

Other amenities available at Texas Best Smokehouse are:

- Private brand fudge;
- Gourmet candy, snacks, jams, nuts, wine and energy drinks;
- Diesel gasoline;
- Fresh coffee;
- High-end trucker facilities; and
- Souvenir gifts.

Due to the demand for Texas Best Smokehouse's private label specialty products, they are also available for purchase from an online store, www.texasbestshop.com.

"We love to give our customers an experience where they can go somewhere and say, 'Hey, I was traveling from Florida to California and I stopped at this Texas-style Smokehouse, a big, nice place on the interstate, and when I

"We want to have somewhere that the entire family can realize that we're someplace they can stop at and know that the restrooms are always clean, the food is always fresh, and they're going to have a great experience here."

— Mohammed Sharaf, Texas Best Smokehouse

went in, they've got good barbecue, jams and meats.' This is the experience we want to be able to give them," Mohammed said.

Looking to the Past for the Future

As for the future of Texas Best Smokehouse, Mohammed said his family has no intention to sell despite his father's passing four years ago. Instead, they plan to continue growing the brand through new builds and acquisitions, and building upon his father's legacy.

"We want to have somewhere that the entire family can realize that we're someplace they can stop at and know that the restrooms are always clean, the food is always fresh, and they're going to have a great experience here," Mohammed told *Convenience Store News*.

STORE SPOTLIGHT



The goal of Texas Best Smokehouse travel centers is to give travelers, commuters and truckers a memorable experience.



Recently, Texas Best Smokehouse opened its ninth location in Dallas, and two additional sites are on the docket to be built within the next 18 months. One of the new-build travel centers will be in a popular location in Grapevine, Texas, situated near Great Wolf Lodge and Gaylord Texan, one of the largest hotels in

the Lone Star State.

That travel center will be the first Texas Best Smokehouse to have a patio surrounding the travel center, plus it will feature the company's first tunnel car wash.

"We look to customers to tell us what they want in terms of merchandising and food options, so it's not the same across all stores," Mohammed said. "While the experience of Texas Best Smokehouse will always be the same, and guests know what to expect in terms of customer service and cleanliness, we absolutely cater to the locals and every store we build is different. We have no cookie-cutter model." **CSN**