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Big Bubba's Bad BBQ is recipe for success

EVC Loan Guarantee Program assists local restaurateur in business expansion

By Robin S. Dudley

Combine a creative, hard-working, hands-on entrepreneur like Roger Sharp, an inspired vision, commitment, a strong business track record and the success of Sharp's various ventures like the popular Paso Robles restaurant, Big Bubba's Bad BBQ and what do you get? According to Cindy Smith, Assistant Vice President of U.S. Government Lending at Mission Community Bank, and Dave Mookdar, Loan Administrator at the Economic Vitality Corporation of San Luis Obispo County, it's a winning recipe for successful business expansion.

Mission Community Bank and the EVC recently collaborated to help Roger Sharp get a Small Business Administration loan, which will enable him to open a second Big Bubba's Bad BBQ restaurant in North County this spring. The new location at 8050 El Camino Real in Atascadero (in the Albertson's shopping center), will bring Big Bubba's renowned combination of family-friendly dining and casual bar-b-que cuisine to the city, along with new job opportunities and economy-stimulating revenue.

Roger Sharp's entrepreneurial journey, business philosophy and talent for turning casual dining into an entertainment experience had simple beginnings. Purchasing a portable concession cart in 1983, the Paso Robles native began by selling churros and pretzels – first at Avila Beach, and then at the California Midstate Fair in Paso Robles.

After ten years of success with his portable food concession venture, the energetic Sharp decided to diversify with the addition of a more permanent eating venue in Paso Robles. In 1993 he opened Good Ol' Burgers on 24th Street, across from the fairgrounds. The small, western-themed fast food restaurant with distinctively bold and decorative signage is still a familiar landmark, serving locals, fair-goers and hungry highway travelers.

In 1998, Sharp's adventurous spirit and love of the carefree, carnival-like fair atmosphere sparked another new business venture – a Big Bubba's Bad BBQ. Purchasing four more portable concession units, he began traveling the fair circuit in a four-state area serving up "Bad to the Bone" bar-b-que and other tasty fare. (Now a fairground mainstay, Big Bubba's is often ranked the top stand at each event in business volume.)

Sharp's observations while on the road, ideas gained at various fair venues, as well as visits to theme attractions in Las Vegas continued to inspire his business philosophy and knack for providing food with an entertaining flair. It also fuelled a new dream – to open an actual Big Bubba's Bad BBQ restaurant in Paso Robles. A self-proclaimed "big kid," Sharp envisioned his future establishment as a fun, feel-good, family-oriented place where

kids would want to come.

In 2001, that dream became reality when a former motorcycle shop building just up the street from Good Ol' Burgers became available for rent. With creativity, perseverance and painstaking attention to detail, he personally oversaw the renovation, transforming the concrete block building at 1125 24th Street into an elaborate, fort-like updated western adventure – its massive wooden facade rivaling Disneyland's Frontier Land.

A creative western motif, liberal use of wood, rock and water features, open floor plan with lots of casual seating, and view into the kitchen from the dining area help create the restaurant's unique and casual ambiance. Different from most restaurants, guests – including kids – are allowed to wander around and enjoy themselves while waiting for their meals. Adults are invited to belly up to the rustic, full-service bar for wine, beer or spirits.

Humorous touches abound, like cowboy and Indian mannequin greeters, a large animated buffalo head on the wall that bellows out words of welcome to guests, and servers who frequently break into choreographed dance numbers. There are jail cells to eat in (advanced reservations recommended), a "General Store" where Big Bubba's trademark BBQ sauces, seasonings and promotional items can be purchased, and even a mechanical bull, whose varying speeds can accommodate and delight wranglers of all ages and skill levels. Sharp admits, "We'll do anything to get a smile."

At Big Bubba's the motto is, "If it's not fun, we're not going to do it." According to Sharp, "We want to draw you into our world, so we've created a carefully controlled

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Above – Owner Roger Sharp and "friend" greet guests to Big Bubba's Bad BBQ in Paso Robles.

Left – The western fort-like facade of Big Bubba's in Paso Robles sets the stage for fun, family-friendly dining.



Big Bubba's Bad BBQ

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environment, specifically designed to entertain and generate smiles." Even the upbeat country music is intentionally played a little loud to distract guests

from their day-to-day thoughts, and keep conversations light and festive.

With a staff of forty employees in Paso Robles, and seating capacity for approximately 140 guests, Big Bubba's

Paso Robles clientele consists of half local residents and half tourists. The restaurant offers a full menu of bar-b-cued ribs, chicken, and tri-tip, salads, appropriately named side dishes like Texas Taters and Bad to the Bone Nachos, and desserts. Since opening, the restaurant has doubled its expected annual projections.

Therefore, it's not surprising that Sharp has now decided to take Big Bubba's same fun-generating business phi-

losophy and recipe for success to Atascadero.

"When Roger came to Mission Community Bank to discuss his business expansion, we saw his total commitment," said Cindy Smith, who facilitated the SBA loan through the bank's Paso Robles office. "He had an established business, experience in the food industry, a successful track record, reasonable [revenue and cost] projections, and had done his due diligence to get the City of Atascadero and the Planning Commission to buy in to the project." She added that Sharp's pre-established relationship with the building contractor who renovated his Paso Robles location was also a plus.

However the inherently risky nature of the restaurant industry made getting conventional financing difficult. Smith contacted Dave Mookiar at the EVC to see if Sharp's new location would qualify for the EVC's Revolving Loan Guarantee Program. Cash guarantees for

the program come from Community Block Grant funds provided to participating cities by the U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). These funds are then made available to the EVC by the respective City Councils for local projects that will benefit the community by creating or saving jobs, or stimulating the local economy. After reviewing Sharp's qualifications and business plan, the EVC was able to guarantee a portion of Sharp's loan, thereby facilitating his business expansion.

With a target opening date of March 2004, Big Bubba's Bad BBQ in Atascadero will have the same western

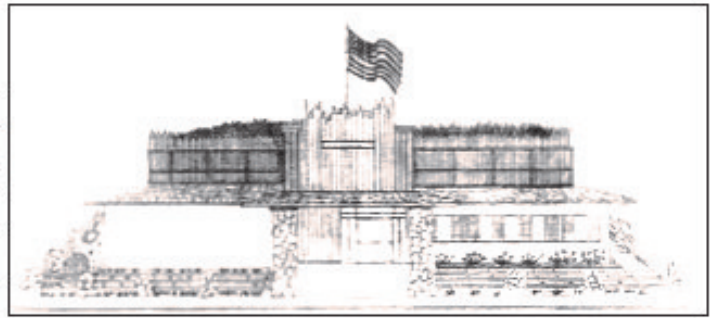
theme and casual, family-oriented atmosphere as the original restaurant, except with a cozier feel due to its smaller building size. The location will accommodate 90 guests, and will employ four full-time and 20 part-time staff. They will target a primarily local dining clientele.

Roger Sharp says his goal is to give Atascadero a great place to take the family out for a fun night. "I want Big Bubba's to be a place the City of Atascadero can be proud of."

For more information on Big Bubba's Bad BBQ, contact Roger Sharp at (805) 238-6272, or go to their website: www.BigBubbasbadBBQ.com.



"Ride the bull" at Big Bubba's Bad BBQ.



Artist's rendering of Big Bubba's Bad BBQ in Atascadero.