

Tasty sauce gets test on Meijer shelves

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GRAND RAPIDS — If you know Ruben Elder Jr., you know his barbecue sauce.

And after being pestered by friends for years to get his homemade specialty bottled and in stores, Elder has managed to get Ruben's Chuck Wagon Old Fashioned All Purpose BBQ Sauce on shelves at six area Meijer stores on a six-month trial basis.

"It goes to show: You try something long enough and keep the faith, you can get it," said Oliver Hale, perhaps better known as the host of "Chef O's Place" on GRTV, Channel 25.

Chef O has used Elder's sauce on his show.

"When viewers say, 'Where can you get it?,' I have something to tell them now."

The roots for Elder's sauce come

THE LIST

Talkin' barbecue

Ruben's Chuck Wagon Old Fashioned All Purpose BBQ Sauce sells for \$3.29 for a 19-oz. bottle. Six Meijer stores carry it:

- 1801 Marketplace Drive, Caledonia
- 5531 28th St. SE, Cascade Township
- 1997 East Beltline Ave. NE, Grand Rapids
- 1540 28th St. SE, Grand Rapids
- 3434 Century Center Drive SW, Grandville
- 5500 Clyde Park Ave. SW, Wyoming

from his family's East Texas kitchen.

But he was not enamored of a barbecue sauce with sage and paprika made by his father, a chef. So, he experimented, and brought the recipe he

SEE SAUCE, C2



PRESS PHOTO/PAUL L. NEWBY II

Saucy: Ruben Elder Jr. shows off his homemade barbecue sauce called Ruben's Chuck Wagon Old Fashioned All Purpose BBQ Sauce.

SAUCE TASTINGS AT MEIJER STORES NOV. 4

CONTINUED FROM C1

developed with him when he moved to Kentwood in the 1960s.

For years, he won over taste buds at family events and company outings across town.

Elder had — for a time — worked at both Steelcase Inc. and furniture-component supplier Compatico as an assemblyman.

He still works at Compatico. And his wife, Marilyn, is assistant to Steelcase Inc. President/Chief Executive Officer James Hackett.

“Jim Hackett tried it one day, and ever since he dragged a gallon around everywhere he goes,” he said.

While Marilyn lined up marketing and financial help for Elder’s presentation to Meijer’s purchasing staff, good barbecue sauce comes down to taste.

To provide a tasty boost, Elder brought in ribs, meatballs, jerky, baked beans and other delectables cooked in his sauce. Elder also “did some cooking for them. ... Best ribs they ever had before in their whole lives.”

Sold, for now.

“I’ve had people standing

“It’s the only one
my mother-in-law
will eat.”

— chef Matt Wolfgang

over my shoulder trying to steal that for years.” said Matt Wolfgang, proprietor of Wolfgang’s Restaurant in Eastown, of Ruben’s Chuck Wagon sauce.

Wolfgang has used the sauce for menu items and at home.

“It’s the only one my mother-in-law will eat,” he said.

To get Elder’s recipe bottled, Tom McKendree, another Eastown businessman, introduced him to a representative of Alferi Laboratories Inc., a Little Chute, Wis.-based spices and seasonings manufacturer.

When Elder first sent his recipe off to Alferi for duplication, the first try was less than inspiring. While Elder didn’t like it and friends also panned it, he guessed the problem right away.

“I know exactly what you guys did wrong,” I said. “Get

that nasty smoke out of my barbecue sauce,” he recalled, laughing. “... The tongue tells everything.”

On the next try two months later, Alferi got it right.

That was six years ago.

Since, the sauce has been served in restaurants including Wolfgang’s and 54th Street Lounge. The sauce also won fans’ nod at a rib-cooking competition sponsored by Gordon Food Service.

Now, Ruben’s Chuck Wagon is available on Meijer shelves, with Elder stocking — and restocking — the product himself. He restocked three cases — 36 bottles — in the first three weeks.

While it’s a slow season for barbecue, he plans Chuck Wagon tastings and demonstrations in the six stores Nov. 4.

By spring, he expects to have a rib cooker special-ordered from Texas that can handle 400 slabs of ribs at once to take his show on the road.

His chef friend has no doubt Elder will succeed. “He is unbelievable,” Wolfgang said.