

Screen star promotes family rib franchise

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Vincent D'Onofrio, star of NBC's "Law & Order:..." (Francisco Kjolseth/The Salt Lake Tribune)

SANDY - There is precious little celebrity stardust sprinkled around Utah's eateries.

Robert Redford and his Zoom and Sundance restaurants come to mind. And former Jazz player Mark Eaton's Tuscany and Franck's.

Now, diners can think of Detective Robert Goren, the lead character in the TV series "Law & Order: Criminal Intent" or the hilarious villain, Edgar, in "Men in Black," when they munch on slow-cooked barbecued meats at Rib City. The restaurant opens on Saturday, and then seven days a week, initially from 4 p.m. to 10 p.m.

Actor Vincent D'Onofrio has teamed with his sister and brother-in-law, Toni and Ron Jorgensen, to open this Southern, speciality barbecue restaurant at 2071 E. 9400 South, Sandy.

This is D'Onofrio's first Rib City franchise and the Jorgensens' second. The other opened last year in American Fork, and there are plans for franchises in Park City, Saratoga Springs and St. George.

On Wednesday, D'Onofrio sipped a cool drink and dutifully dealt with the media as his sister and brother-in-law labored amid ladders and boxes for their grand opening. Although D'Onofrio will be back in New York this weekend to film another "Law and Order" episode, he'll be dropping by the restaurants, as he always does when visiting family.

His sister brought him to Utah. She had worked for Chili's, met her husband, a native of Pleasant Grove, and the two settled in American Fork. It was her family's Florida roots that brought about the Utah franchises.

Rib City, which opened in Fort Myers, Fla., in 1989, operates 13 corporate restaurants in south Florida, from St. Petersburg to Immokalee, along with nine franchises in Utah, Washington, Colorado and Michigan.

The down-home fare features baby back and St. Louis spare ribs, lean beef and pork, chicken and smoked turkey breast, topped with one of four sauces - brown sugar, vinegar, hot and Carolina mustard.

D'Onofrio said he decided to invest because of his sister's long career in the food industry and the success of her first franchise. Being the loyal partner, he answered questions on Wednesday, without the assurance one would expect of his 50-some-odd film roles.

"I still consider myself an actor trying to get a job," he said. "I never sought to be famous or a star. I just keep doing what I do."

His supporting and character roles in movies are so diverse that his nickname is the human chameleon. He played a serial killer in "The Cell," a time traveler in "Happy Accidents" and a man mistaken for a superhero in "Adventures in Babysitting."

His role in "Men in Black" was a bit perplexing because D'Onofrio wasn't sure how to play a man whose body was taken over by a giant insect. Inspiration came after pausing at a sports store. D'Onofrio strapped braces to his calves and thighs, and taped his knees bent and his ankles straight for that famous bug strut.

The television series has taken away his anonymity. It's something "that's gone forever," he said with a sigh, as episodes play around the world "until the day I die."

Still, D'Onofrio has no publicist. He is, frankly, a shy man who makes an effort at being easygoing when strangers approach. He took to heart the advice of his late friend, Gregory Hines, the triple-threat star of stage, screen and television, to "always be gracious to the fans. Even if your kid is having a meltdown, they applaud you," said D'Onofrio. "He taught to give that back."

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