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## Smoque sets out to reform Chicago barbecue scene

BY LEAH A. ZELDES  
Daily Herald Correspondent  
Posted Thursday, February 15, 2007

Barbecue, as I've written before, is a religious issue.

The best kind of meat - beef brisket or pork shoulder? Baby backs or spare ribs? The style of sauce - sweet, spicy or mustardy? The kind of fire ... the type of wood ... the style of cooker ... whether the finished product should taste strongly or faintly of smoke ... what constitutes the perfect texture... Disciples of the pit debate these questions as heatedly as any clerics ever argued over how many angels can dance on the head of a pin.

So earnestly do the first-time restaurateurs behind the hot, new Smoque BBQ take their theme that, like Martin Luther nailing his theses to the Wittenburg church door, they issued a four-page online manifesto on the subject before they even opened. "If I'd realized how many people were going to read that," said Barry Sorkin, one of five partners, who opened Smoque (pronounced "smoke") in Chicago's Irving Park neighborhood in December, "I'd have taken it more seriously."

Sorkin and co-owners Chris Hendrickson, Mike McDermott, Oscar Romero and Al Sherman have undertaken a delectable reformation of Chicago barbecue.

They offer no quarter to worshippers of local styles. The Smoquers protest both the slick, slide-off-the-bone baby-back ribs beloved in sit-down spots on Chicago's North and Northwest Side neighborhoods and suburbs, and the gristly, cartilaginous rib tips popular at takeout joints on the West and South sides. They cry out against the mortification of meat heavily doused in overpowering sauce. They neither peddle the indulgences of hot links nor dispense wickedly spongy white bread.

Preaching the gospel of low and slow, Smoque's manifesto runs a lot longer than its menu, which proffers baby-back pork ribs, St. Louis-style ribs, pulled pork shoulder, chopped and sliced beef brisket and chicken, all slow smoked with apple and oak wood, and available in sandwiches, a la carte and in platters, plus sides and salad. The Smoque style hearkens to Missouri, Texas and the South without quite matching any specific region. The five owners all come from the Midwest, not any special barbecue country. Sorkin said his first ribs came from Hecky's in Evanston, though that's not a style he wants to emulate.

Smoque's byword is "Not just another pretty sauce." Many barbecue buffs believe that smoked meat should stand on its own, sauceless, and while Smoque doesn't go that far, its sauce surely doesn't dominate.

The manifesto claims Smoque uses different sauces for the different meats, but if so, the distinctions are subtle. All the sauce I tasted seemed the same: unexceptional, thick, tomato-based and mildly seasoned - not too sweet, but not too tangy. (Chili-heads will need to pack their own heat.) They dollop it sparingly on the finished barbecue and provide an additional supply in plastic cups for those who like wetter 'cue.

To my taste, the two best things Smoque does are pulled pork and baby-back ribs. Smoque gives its lean yet succulent pork shoulder 12 hours in the smoker before shredding it by hand to mix the smoky outsides and the juicy insides.



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The ribs get a thorough coating with savory Memphis-style dry rub (fine for me, but probably not for the salt averse) before going in the smoker, and a light, finishing baste of sauce that caramelizes into a crust. The baby backs smoke for three hours, which gives them a nicely smoky flavor and a toothsome texture, moist but still chewy. The closely trimmed St. Louis ribs (slightly meatier spare ribs with the tips removed) smoke for one more hour, resulting in too tender a consistency for me, but one that might be pleasing to those who prefer soft ribs. A half-and-half platter lets you try both.

I'm no fan of Texas-style barbecued beef brisket - it always tastes dried out to me, and so does this. Smoque's brisket, dry rubbed and smoked some 15 hours, comes out coated with juice on the outside, but tastes as if the meat's interior cells had given up all their moisture. You can have the beef either sliced or chopped.

The restaurant also serves half chickens, smoked three hours on the bone. A nice "Add a taste!" option lets you get a sample of pulled pork, brisket or St. Louis ribs to go with your main choice.

Winning sides, available on their own or as part of dinner platters, include refreshing, onion-laced coleslaw dressed in vinaigrette and celery seed; excellent, crispy, skin-on, fresh cut fries, served in brown paper bags; and very good molasses-spiked baked beans, chock-full of bacon and smoked pork bits. The unremarkable cornbread, baked in a tinfoil cup, is on the sweet side, Northern-style. The macaroni and cheese has an unpleasantly granular quality. Delicious but tiny, the one dessert, a fresh-tasting mini peach cobbler flavored with almonds, merits ordering seconds.

This new church of barbecue has been gaining converts so quickly that you might have trouble finding a pew. When things are crowded, they're also chaotic, and no one seems to be policing the 50-seat dining room to direct patrons to chairs in any orderly way. Worse, the restaurant tends run out of various items. If your heart's set on some particular dish, go early and call ahead.

You line up to order at the counter and they holler when your order's ready - which can take a while - and dole out the food on metal trays for you to carry back to your table. Unlimited refills of Coca-Cola and other pop come from a self-serve fountain in a somewhat hard-to-reach corner, but you can bring your own beer and wine.

If you're a firm adherent to a local rib sect, you probably won't find Smoque worthwhile, but if you're a displaced barbecue lover missing your home church, you owe it to yourself to taste how the Smoquers practice what they preach.

- Restaurant reviews are based on one anonymous visit. Our aim is to describe the overall dining experience while guiding the reader toward the menu's strengths. The Daily Herald does not publish reviews of restaurants it cannot recommend.

### **Smoque**

**3800 N. Pulaski Road, Chicago, (773) 545-7427 [www.smoquebbq.com](http://www.smoquebbq.com)**

Cuisine:

Smokin' barbecued pork, beef and chicken

Setting:

No-frills, counter-service joint in Irving Park

Price range:

Sandwiches \$3.95 to \$6.45; entrees \$5.95 to \$19.45; dessert \$1.45

Hours:

11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Sundays and Tuesdays through Thursdays; 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays

Accepts:

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