

PURISTS SUFFER WHEN THEY DENY
BRAND BBQ'S PRINCIPAL PLEASURES



A Good Smoke

By Michael Nagrant

SOMETIMES I WONDER IF anyone's been shot over a piece of brisket. I knew that if you served the wrong type of sauce or rub on a rib in the wrong part of a country, you risked starting a war. But, I didn't know just how hardcore the BBQ crowd

could be until a few weeks ago when, as Chicago correspondent for SeriousEats.com, I declared that Chicago BBQ was better than Memphis BBQ. Commenters responding to my story impeached my sanity and my city (referring to Chicago as Podunk). These are the same folks who call fall-of-the-bone meat "baby food," or baked ribs "pork jello" and who start nasty rumors about places with automated smokers. Tiger Woods probably has a better shot at reconciling with his wife than any potential restaurateur does pleasing the BBQ illuminati.

And sure enough, even before Brand BBQ Market opened in Logan Square six weeks ago, the BBQ vanguard were already debating Brand's definition of burnt ends and making fun of their smoked tofu offering. Smoke groupies started asking about Brand's specific cooking temperatures, times and equipment (Cook Shack smoker filled with apple and cherry wood) before the first timbers had ever been stoked. The whole thing felt like a bunch of "Star Wars" groupies debating what kind of metal to use when recreating Princess Leia's Jedi-era bikini. Although, having just discovered the Web site leiasmatalbikini.com which sports the tag line "What happens in Jabba's palace stays in Jabba's Palace" (unless you work at a comic-book store, the bikini galleries may not be safe for work), I think I'll cast my lot with the BBQ crowd.

Despite poking fun, I can appreciate the staunch guardianship of tradition. Certainly it raises standards and ensures that anyone who wants to smoke meat for a living put a little skin in the game and thus we all hopefully get better food. However, I think such nitpicking also intimidates those who might otherwise practice the smoky arts and robs us of BBQ innovation.

Consider those burnt-ends, traditionally the fatty smaller ends or points of a piece of beef brisket that are transformed by heat and smoke into a carbonized yet molasses-covered bit of beef candy. Legendary New Yorker scribe Calvin Trillin, a man who knows food like Ken Jennings knows trivia, and who eats heaping plates of burnt ends, once suggested that the original Arthur Bryant's (thought to be the originator of burnt ends) in Kansas City was "possibly the single best restaurant in the world."

Unlike the single-smoking Bryant's, Brand double-smokes their burnt ends and then deep fries and smothers the top of their mac-and-cheese with them. What you're left with is sort of a sweet beef bacon-like hunk of crispy skin and melty fat—a stark, and for me preferable, textural contrast to the traditional chewier burnt end.

Brand also circumvents tradition with one of its pit-masters, or I should say pit-mistress, Charity Smith, a Cooking and Hospitality Institute of Chicago culinary grad and veteran of the Stanley's Kitchen and Tap restaurant group. While the BBQ world isn't quite the Augusta National Golf Club, it's still dominated by a coterie of men, often of the trucker-hat-wearing Santa-bearded-and-bellied variety. Smith, on the other hand, with her sharp air-slicing ponytail, mischievous Tina Fey-like eye glint and dark-rimmed librarian glasses, would have been a prime candidate for Van Halen's "Hot for Teacher" video.

She may look like a bottled-up minx, but she's a vicious carnivore. When I ask her about her cooking philosophy, she declares, "I love fat. I love meat. The fatter the brisket, the better." I'm not sure she thinks I'm convinced, so after a beat of silence she reiterates, "I love fat, meat and more fat." After I bite into a melting hunk of pork-belly confit kissed with smoke and sporting a golden glinting pane of crispy skin drizzled with maple mayo, there's no doubt.

However, if you need more convincing, consider that Smith also invented the "Brandcheesie," a well-endowed venison sausage stuffed with sweet, pungent, oozy, gorgonzola wrapped in crispy bacon, swaddled in fried onions and drizzled with brandy cherry bbq sauce. It's unfortunate Brand is only open until 10pm, because I'd really like to be ending a lot more drunken nights indulging in this, the most glorious hangover helper since deep-fried Twinkies at the old Swank Franks.

Pulled duck. while not as cholesterol-level threatening as the venison sausage, is lusciously moist and lightly touched with smoke, a nice move that allows the touch of pleasant wild meat flavor to shine. Balking bubbas will certainly bemoan the mild brisket showing a bare whiff of smoke. Likewise, a couple of tough ribs had me humming Otis Redding's "Try a Little Tenderness." But, whatever lack in pure traditional BBQ Brand may have, they more than make up for it with tasty innovation.

Brand BBQ Market, 2824 West Armitage, (773)687-8148.

TIP OF THE WEEK
CLAIRE ZULKEY



My first year of college was probably the unhappiest time of my life. At Illinois State University, I went from living eighteen years in the great city of Chicago to being holed up in a dorm room in Normal, with no friends and a witless weightlifter roommate. I took the bus home on a lot of weekends, if only to be around the record collection I couldn't cart with me. While I don't regret anything, if I had to do it over again, I definitely wouldn't have chosen that path. The heroine in Claire Zulkey's young-adult novel "An Off Year," released this past summer, decides not to go to college her first year after all, and watches her friends do so with varying degrees of success. (Her parents wind up sending her to a shrink.) Zulkey captures the confusing, unique tension of the time, when a teenager faces leaving home for the first time to either fulfill some goal or, more often, live up to some expectation, as it's often not considered deeply enough the emotional difficulties of being just post-high school. Zulkey knows that kids don't grow up at a snap of the fingers, nor at the reception of a diploma on a stage. (Tom Lynch)

Claire Zulkey discusses her work December 17 at Book Cellar, 4736-38 North Lincoln, (773)293-2665, at 7pm. Free.

READINGS

THU/17

→ Claire Zulkey

Daniel Nester
See Tip of the Week.
The Book Cellar, 4736 N. Lincoln, (773)293-2665. 7pm. Free.

Mickey Leigh and Legs McNeil

The authors discuss "I Slept with Joey Ramone: A Family Memoir."
Barbara's Bookstore, UIC, (312)222-0890. 7:30pm. Free.

SAT/19

Sappho's Solstice Salon

With C.C. Carter.
Women and Children First Bookstore, 5233 N. Clark, (773)769-9299. 7:30pm. \$7-\$10.

SUN/20

→ Orange Alert Reading Series

Featuring Jeff Phillips, Goldie Goldboom, Jamie Calder and Tim Jones-Yelvington.
The Whistler, 2421 N. Milwaukee, (773)227-3530. 6pm. Free.

Powell's Bookstore

1501 East 57th Street
828 South Wabash
2850 North Lincoln Avenue



where
academic
books still
have
meaning

We Buy
Books Too!

