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Sliced brisket platter
at Smoque BBQ
KAITLYN MCQUAID PHOTO FOR REDEYE

Worth a trip

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

You could say that Smoque, an Irving Park barbecue restaurant that's one of Chicago's best, all started with a very large Texan.

Ten years or so before Smoque was even a dream of chef Barry Sorkin and his partners Mike McDermott, Chris Hendrickson and Al Sherman, Sorkin and a buddy from Texas visited the now-defunct barbecue spot Merle's in Evanston. Sorkin's buddy asked Merle's if they had brisket. They said no. "You can't pretend to be a good barbecue joint without having brisket," he said.

So, as Sorkin got more into barbecue and he and his partners made plans to open a restaurant, he made pilgrimages to the brisket capital of the world—Austin, Texas—and hit up all the temples of smoke. Louie Mueller Barbecue was his favorite. "There are a lot of new-guard places like Franklin and Stiles Switch," Sorkin said. "They're very good and technically precise. But you can't beat the experience of Mueller's or Smitty's. They've been there forever. They're quintessential." He added, "Maybe in 50 to 70 years [Smoque] will have that kind of character, but you can't manufacture it."

Sorkin and his partners at Smoque knew they couldn't create the history or the authentically worn interior of those Texas greats, so they focused on the quality of their food. In the case of their brisket, they developed a proprietary rub that's heavy on black pepper. They smoke 250 to 300 whole 12- to 14-pound briskets for 13 to 14 hours over a mix of oak and applewood each week. Using a whole

brisket is tricky because they're not uniformly sized. The flat end cooks faster, while the middle and ends are fattier and filled with connective tissue; some barbecue joints will

only cook the flat part because it's quick and easy, but they lose the flavor that the thicker end imparts.

The Smoque crew compensates by treating each part separately: chopping the flat end into small pieces and adding sauce to keep it moist, while cutting against the grain and slicing the thicker, juicier parts.

The brisket comes chopped or sliced, served alone (\$8.95 a la carte or \$12.45 with slaw and two sides) or on a brioche-style bun (\$7.95 a la carte or \$10.45 with slaw and one side), and is served with a tangy vinegar and tomato sauce. Because of the vinegar, some might call it Memphis-style; however, Memphis sauces are runny while Smoque's is thicker, with a touch of sweetness. But, then again, Smoque's brisket—topped with a crispy black bark of caramelized pepper and brown sugar, aka the "burnt end," whose pink smoke-ringed interior oozes with beefy succulence—doesn't even really need sauce.

The brisket is so good that I started to wonder: Could fate be so fickle that, had that brisket-loving Texan not spoken up, things might have panned out differently? Turns out, no. Sorkin said, "I'd like to think that brisket and I would have eventually found each other."

MICHAEL NAGRANT IS A REDEYE SPECIAL CONTRIBUTOR. REPORTERS VISIT RESTAURANTS UNANNOUNCED AND MEALS ARE PAID FOR BY REDEYE. REDEYE@TRIBUNE.COM | @REDEYEEATDRINK

**Brisket
at Smoque
BBQ**

3800 N. Pulaski
Road 773-545-
7427