

eat & drink

Brisket, ribs and a hot link with coleslaw and fried rice at Dinosaur Bar-B-Que
LENNY GILMORE/REDEYE PHOTOS



WHERE THERE'S smoke

EAST COAST FAVORITE DINOSAUR BAR-B-QUE BRINGS SERIOUS FLAVOR TO WEED STREET

Dinosaur Bar-B-Que
923 W. Weed St.
312-462-1053

Heating up

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

If you told me an East Coast barbecue joint with eight other locations was opening a monstrous 12,000-square-foot restaurant in the booty-shaking vortex that is Weed Street, I would have said, uh, yeah, that's probably not gonna be serious. But Dinosaur Bar-B-Que, which has set up shop steps from sports/country/let's-get-wasted bar Joe's and gentlemen's club VIP's, is no flash in the pan.

Founder and chief pitmaster John Stage started a barbecue revolution with a mobile smoker at a motorcycle show in Albany, N.Y., in 1983 before opening a restaurant in Syracuse back in 1988. He went on to conquer Brooklyn and Manhattan with one location in each. Whereas many barbecue restaurants use automatic "set it and forget it" smokers, Stage uses Oylar pits from J&R Manufacturing, a setup that requires the wisdom and experience of a practiced pitmaster to know how much wood to burn to control temperature and the right time to pull the meat off.

With so many restaurants and a celebrated award-winning history, I expect Stage to be hamming it up on TV like a pitmaster version of Guy Fieri, but he's humble and focused, and ridiculously low-key. He never talks in sound bites and is almost shy to take credit for anything. That being said, he does have a credo of sorts: "If the brisket is right, then everything's right." What he means is that brisket is one of the hardest cuts to master—it's notoriously dry or tough, even when you pay careful attention—and so if you can get that right, you can do anything. With that in mind, I stopped by to see how the brisket and everything else was faring.

Badass brisket and its brethren

The brisket wasn't just right. It was [bleep]ing unbelievable. Thick slices of beef brisket (\$18.95) topped with pickled jalapeno wept moist, peppery juices and made me realize that, no matter how obnoxious the drunken, whooping masses might be across the street at Joe's, I would ford that river of shenanigans to get to this stuff. Stage's statement about everything following from brisket holds true. St. Louis ribs (\$11.95-\$27.95 for a quarter rack to full rack with two sides) smoked over hickory wood featured a thick bark on top and a crackling meat-candy skin on the underside. The pink smoke ring on the interior—that's the telltale sign of slow-smoked barbecue—was at least a quarter of an inch thick. The hot link (available as part of combo plates priced \$17.95-21.95, which include one to two other meats, two sides and cornbread) had a rippling grill-marked skin and an interior flecked with red and green pepper. The spice factor was mild, but the texture and smoky essence were spot-on.



Dinosaur's side dishes include barbecued fried rice (clockwise from top), cornbread, curried cauliflower and sweet potatoes, and cabbage salad.

For me, Smoque BBQ in Irving Park sets the bar for Chicago barbecue, and when it comes to meat, Dinosaur is pretty neck-and-neck with Smoque. What I really respect about Stage and the Dinosaur crew is that they easily could rest on their established standards, but instead, they've introduced some stellar new Chicago-only options, including hacked jerk ribs (\$12.95), a St. Louis rib that's hacked with a cleaver straight out of the smoker and glazed with tangy, spicy sauce. There's also twice-cooked lamb shoulder (\$19.95) that's rubbed with gochujang (Korean red pepper paste), marinated for 24 hours, smoked for three hours and then crisped in a pan. "I'm a huge fan of Asian flavors and Korean barbecue in general," Stage said. I love Korean barbecue, but it isn't nearly as satisfying as this lamb, because something you grill quickly over hot coals tableside just doesn't have the depth of flavor that Stage's silky slow-smoked lamb does. Served over fried rice, his version bursts with sharp ginger and sweet soy notes. My friend and I ripped it apart and scooped up every last shred.

So-so sides

Smoque still has bragging rights, however, when it comes to side dishes. At Dinosaur, you get a choice of two sides with every meat combo ordered. I liked the idea and novelty of offering a side of curried cauliflower and sweet potato, but it was mushy and needed some kind of crunchy contrasting component. The Harlem potato salad, so named because it was inspired by Stage's tour of Harlem soul food eateries before he opened his Manhattan location of Dinosaur, had a nice tangy mustard and Cajun spice flavor, but needed more salt. The mac 'n' cheese, drizzled with a creamy cheddar sauce, could have used more salt, too. The S&S cabbage, a fermented kimchi-style salad, was fizzy and spicy, an awesome match for the lamb shoulder.

Wings and other things

Under the appetizer section of the menu, Dinosaur's chicken wings (\$3.95 for three wings, \$7.95 for six or \$14.95 for 13) are pit-smoked, grilled to order and tossed with sauce. They rival the ones I've always loved at Twisted Spoke and should be considered a standard for your future Super Bowl parties. You can choose from a variety of sauces, but I settled on the fiery, sweet Wango Tango, a vinegar, tomato- and molasses-based barbecue sauce spiked with habanero and cayenne. Creamy deviled eggs (\$3.95 for three eggs, \$6.95 for six or \$12.95 for 12) arrived sprinkled with a little Cajun spice, while fried green tomatoes (\$6.95 for three, \$8.95 for five) were crispy, piquant and showered with salty pecorino romano cheese.

More Northwoods than Hell's Angels

The original Dinosaur Bar-B-Que in Syracuse is dark and a little dusty with tons of neon and motorcycle memorabilia; it feels like a true roadside biker bar. The Chicago location has a few vintage movie posters celebrating motorcycle flicks, but it's not nearly as Hell's Angels as I expected. There's a lot of rustic dark wood covering most every surface, so you do feel like you've gone camping in your grandpa's Wisconsin cabin. There are plans for a boisterous beer garden—which I can see being a big draw this summer—but right now it's just a bunch of empty picnic tables.

Bottom line

Even though Dinosaur Bar-B-Que has nine locations, its pitmasters clearly are dedicated to craft and innovation. The sides could use a little work, but the quality of the smoked meat ranks with some of my hometown favorites, such as Smoque, Honky Tonk, Smalls and Chicago Q.

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