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LENNY GILMORE/REDEYE PHOTOS

BRONZEVILLE JERK SHACK SERVES CITY'S BEST JERK CHICKEN

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

It will probably be a few years before we really know if Kanye West is a misunderstood genius or certifiably crazy. What I do know—or at least have on good authority—is that despite evidence against it, West is a nice guy. “I know there’s a lot going on and people think Kanye’s gone off, but when I cooked for him on the Yeezus tour, he was the nicest guy ever,” said Pierre Johnson, executive chef of Bronzeville Jerk Shack.

As a former Live Nation concert chef, Johnson also went on tour with the likes of Macklemore and One Direction. The Culinary Institute of America-trained chef, who grew up in Bronzeville and attended Dunbar High School, found his current occupation through an odd twist of fate while touring with iD in 2014.

While working their Soldier Field stop, Johnson broke his leg and was left stranded in Chicago, rehabbing for months. He tried to go

back on the road, but his injury made that difficult. Johnson eventually hooked up with Bernard Loyd, an ex-McKinsey consultant who was creating a culinary business incubator in Bronzeville called Bronzeville Cookin’. Loyd, a jerk aficionado who married into a Jamaican family, already had the idea for a Chicago jerk shack before the two met. Johnson took Loyd’s ideas and executed the culinary vision. I stopped in recently to see if Bronzeville Jerk Shack is a fiery newcomer or a flameless flop.

THE SCENE

Located at 51st Street and Prairie Avenue, the restaurant is situated in the epicenter of past and future greatness. About 10 blocks north, you’ll find one of Louis Armstrong’s old residences. Go east, and you’ll run into Muhammad Ali’s old Chicago digs.

The space features a fire-engine red garage door that swings up to create a breezy al fresco scene come summertime. Inside, the chocolate-colored, rough-hewn tables serve as a gathering place for community meetings and Loyd’s crew of Bronzeville activists and entrepreneurs. Bob Marley croons on a pair of speakers, grill smoke hangs in a haze and juniper and pepper perfume blows over me in waves.

THE FOOD

The reputation of jerk chicken in Chicago is bleak. Some places cover their chicken in

icky pastes, while others rub so much scotch bonnet into their marinades that one bite blows your palate to bits.

But Johnson understands balance.

His jerk chicken (\$4–\$12.50) is exceptionally juicy and rimmed with a touch of heat—but not too much. The skin is crispy, and the juices in some bites are sealed in and carbonized like Han Solo in “The Empire Strikes Back.” Whole chickens are butchered in-house, marinated overnight and partly cooked on a grill. The parts are then smoked and eventually finished to order back on the grill. Because the chicken isn’t totally pre-cooked, this isn’t fast food. You’ll wait a bit, but that’s the worthwhile price of freshness.

If you want more heat, Johnson has developed a vinegar-based jerk sauce served on the side that’s ripe with the citrus-kissed heat of scotch bonnet peppers. Just as juicy

MINI-REVIEW
BRONZEVILLE
JERK SHACK
5055 S. Prairie Ave.
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★★★★★
Heating up



'Hellshire Beach' Festival



Housemade sorrel



Jerk chicken



Bronzeville Jerk Shack

as the chicken are thick hunks of blackened jerk pork on offer. According to Johnson, jerk pork (\$3.50-\$11) is more authentic than chicken. "The Indian tribes in Jamaica developed the technique to cure pork when they were hiding from the British," he said. "They marinated the pork in these spices and buried them in holes in the ground. They couldn't really cook the pork because the fire would be seen by their enemies, so the marinade cooked the chicken or cured it in about a week."

At most places, even when the chicken is good, the side dishes tend to suffer. But again, Johnson is a total pro. The saltfish fritters (\$3) are fried to order. Golden brown and crunchy, they're like sea-kissed hushpuppies stuffed with creamy gossamer threads of fish fillet. "I started on the recipe in April, and we opened in September," Johnson said.

"It wasn't perfect until October. This recipe took forever to get right."

Also on offer is a side dubbed "Hellshire Beach" Festival (\$3). Before tacking it onto my order, I wondered if they'd bring tickets to a Jamaican beachside version of Burning Man. What I got instead were sweet and savory donuts with flesh that puffed a steamy essence of sweet corn.

The only thing I didn't dig was the pineapple upside-down cake (\$3). It was a touch too dense and dry, and it came straight out of the ice-cold refrigerator.

THE DRINKS

One of my favorite soft drinks in the world is Ting (\$2), which is on offer at Bronzeville Jerk Shack. If you've never had it, it's like Squirt infused with about a hundred more pounds of grapefruit flavor per milliliter.

There's also plenty in the Coke-branded fridge out front as well as a selection of ginger beers and a housemade sorrel hibiscus punch (\$2) that I regretfully missed when I dined.

BOTTOM LINE

Bronzeville Jerk Shack serves the best jerk chicken in Chicago. If you don't frequent the neighborhood, it's worth a ride over on the nearby Green Line. In the words of Kanye West, "Shut the [bleep] up and enjoy the greatness."

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