

**Smokin' With Chris**

59 West Center Street  
Southington  
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I got lost in Southington -- just up the street and around the corner from Smokin' With Chris -- and I almost gave up the hunt. But when I pulled over to ask a pedestrian if he'd heard of a BBQ place nearby, I knew I was close. A definite whiff of smoky wind swept into my open window. I started getting excited, like some kind of storm tracker chasing a tornado. Then I saw the brick-red tavern-style building. In the lot out back a large contraption steadily puffed clouds of hardwood smoke into the air.

Inside, you could still smell the smoke. A couple had a pair of rowdy toddlers in the dining room, so I opted for the bar area. But that didn't go so well. One waitress/bartender worked the whole place. She struggled to keep up. After being ignored for a while, I braved the crying kids and returned to the dining room.

I had ample time to figure out what I wanted. The menu at Smokin With Chris is a smart mix of familiar Italian favorites, Asian-inspired fusion and classic BBQ offerings. The slow-smoked meats -- brisket, ribs and pork -- rightly get pride of place. I wanted to sample the full spectrum, so I tried the "Chrischetta" appetizer made with herbed toast topped with feta and tomato and served with a pesto sauce, and the skewers of steak seasoned with a citrus marinade, but I was mostly there to taste the Q.

The Chrischetta packed a lot of savory flavor. The garlic and herbs were well matched with salty cheese. On the skewers, big slices of flank steak were grilled. The marinade of beer, orange and ginger imparted a strong, sweet flavor. This was interesting, but I wouldn't recommend it.

In addition to the BBQ appetizers that are well matched for beer, Chris also offers more delicate starters, like a puff pastry stuffed with asparagus, roasted red pepper, mozzarella and spinach. There are classic sandwiches, burritos, salads and burgers, as well as foot-long hot dogs served with homemade chow-chow (a hot, sweet and tangy cabbage and onion relish one rarely sees outside of North Carolina).

I tried a rib combo with a quarter rack each of spare ribs and baby back ribs. The ribs were cooked right -- not to death, but with a lovely charred exterior that was obscured under the thick sticky faintly fruity BBQ sauce. The pulled pork was excellent. One often finds pulled pork that is over cooked, too stringy and holding too much liquid. Chris's had none of these shortcomings -- the pork was pulled, not shredded or chopped. Another good measure of any southern-inspired eatery is whether one can make a respectable meal out of vegetable sides. Chris's succeeds here too, with maple-sweet baked beans, creamy mac and cheese and spicy sweet potatoes. Best of all was the cucumber salad, with sliced onions and the tang of vinegar.

There's no getting around it; the service was off on the day I stopped in. Requests for water went unfulfilled. Apps arrived with or after entrees. The chef was at a ribs competition, and the restaurant was understaffed. As a result, the kitchen messed up the meal of an elderly couple there to celebrate a birthday with steamed lobster they'd called in advance to order (The staff recovered from the gaff, apologizing profusely, and offering the meal at no charge). It was slow. But, as anyone who's ever smoked a slab of ribs knows, it's practically sacrilegious to rush BBQ. And the food at Smokin With Chris was good, worth going on a little road trip for, worth waiting for. Just come prepared to nurse on a

beer, the way you're supposed to with barbecue.

**Hours:** Closed Mondays.

Extras:

**Cuisine** Barbecue

**Meals Served** Dinner, Lunch