



BBQ Review

Smokin' With Chris

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category: Connecticut BBQ , Southington BBQ

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The Joint

Road travelers with a penchant for pork may know Southington as the home of Brannigan's (you can't miss their "Best Ribs in State" sign at exit 32 driving northward). But a little further off the same I-84 exit is a downtown area that has three other joints offering ribs and and/or barbecue. The best of the bunch may be Smokin' With Chris, just two blocks off Main Street.

The first time I stopped in, I was only going to grab a menu for future reference. But when I pulled into the parking lot and smelled the smoke behind the restaurant, I was past the point of no return. Seeing a plate of ribs on my way in sealed it for me. The joint looks like a converted residence, with two entrances (one for the dining room, another for the bar, though they connect inside). The dining room is nice in an artsy sort of way, with an oversized martini glass and a grand piano to provide some of the décor.

The Menu

The ambitious menu at Smokin' With Chris covers the usual barbecue territory (pork babybacks and spare ribs, beef ribs, pulled pork, brisket, smoked chicken) while adding some upscale touches. Sandwiches include the expected pulled pork and brisket, plus a Cubano, a Philly cheese steak, grilled or blackened chicken, burgers, a pair of hotdogs with onion chow chow, and a Reuben (though the pastrami isn't smoked).

The Appetizers

Appetizers include wings (4 different flavors), burnt ends (made with meat from pork ribs, not beef brisket), nachos, spinach artichoke dip, bruschetta and three different salads. The entrees offer plenty of steak and seafood choices for those not interested in barbecue.

The Meats

For an early weekday dinner on my first visit, I went with the Meat Lovers' combo (\$18.95) that features ribs, pulled pork and brisket). When the generous platter emerged from the kitchen, the first thing I noticed was that the saucing of the meats was a little heavy handed, especially compared to the plate I saw before I sat down. The sauce overpowered the ribs and some of the pork, but the brisket held up nicely. The tender slices had a light smoky flavor, a noticeable smoke ring and the dark, crispy edges I look for. The pork was mostly white chunks, with even the unsauced pieces moist, though light on flavor. The ribs were very tender, perhaps a little too tender, but had a nice porky essence under the sauce. Overall, the meats were pretty good, with the brisket the standout.

I returned with my wife for a Saturday dinner a few months later, revisiting the Meat Lovers' combo for comparison. This time I made sure to request sauce on the side and replace the St Louis ribs with babybacks (that's what was on that plate I admired on that first visit). This time, the brisket arrived in chunks rather than the neat slices, and a little less moist, but the flavor was still there. The pork was served in very large chunks, all with a good portion of dark bark. The pork was served in very large chunks, all with a good portion of dark bark. The fat content was high, but in a good way: instead of an unwelcome intrusion, it was melted and integrated into the meat, providing moisture and flavor. The ribs were also an upgrade, with a thicker, meatier cut than typical babybacks and just the right tenderness. The flavor on all of the meats was very natural, with not a lot of smoke and very little spice. My wife's barbecued chicken had similar attributes: a crisp, golden brown crust and moist meat inside (breast included), but she found the flavor a little bland.

The Sauces

There are two sauces: Chris's and JR's. One is a typical tomato-based barbecue sauce; the other is sort of a kicked-up Worcestershire sauce. Not bad.

The Sides

Sides were good, with the cole slaw very creamy (without being too



Not too far from the main drag. There's a separate bar entrance.



The inside is cozy, with a piano.



Meat Lovers' combo from my first visit.

Mayoey), the austere collard greens very green and the homemade onion rings dark and very crisp.

The bottom line: Flavor profiles at Smokin' With Chris run milder than my preference, but with that caveat aside, I think the execution is generally good to very good. Though I wouldn't call it destination barbecue, I enjoyed both meals and have a feeling I'd be a regular if I lived nearby. I still haven't tried all of the joints in Southington yet, but I'm guessing this is the best of the bunch.



A closer look at the brisket from my first visit.



Babyback ribs from my second visit.



Pork from my second visit.



Another look at the pork from my second visit.



Chicken and collard greens.



Another view of the chicken and collard greens.



Cole slaw.



Onion rings.



Chris and the smoker out back.

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