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# BITS & BITES

## Making a Southern tradition our own

### FOOD TREND | New restaurants want to make Chicago a barbecue destination

BY CHUCK SUDO

When one thinks of foods synonymous with Chicago, Chicago-style hot dogs, deep-dish pizza and steak immediately come to mind. Food historians also note that dishes such as chicken vesuvio and saganaki originated in the Windy City.

However, Chicago has never been known for its barbecue, which is a mystery to some. Given Chicago's important role in the Great Migration, it would seem natural for Southern migrants to import their recipes for barbecue.

And they did for the most part. But, like Chicago in those days, the recipes stayed as segregated as the neighborhoods. LTHForum co-founder — and barbecue expert — Gary Wiviott, notes that instead what passed for barbecue in Chicago at places like Carson's, Twin Anchors, and Calo were heavily sauced ribs that were baked until the meat fell off the bone. "It was like rib Jell-O," Wiviott said.

Wiviott points out that places on the South and West sides, such as Barbara Ann's, Lem's, Uncle John's, and Honey I, always have prepared traditional barbecue. "These places use wood and dry rubs to season and smoke the meats and let the customer decide if they want to sauce them upon serving," Wiviott said.

The past 18 months have seen a slight rise in restaurants focusing on traditional barbecue. Using state-of-the-art Southern Pride smokers and recipes exhaustively researched, the restaurants are bridging the gap between the North, South and West sides.

Leading the charge is Smoque (3800 N. Pulaski, 773-545-7427, [www.smoquebbq.com](http://www.smoquebbq.com)). Wiviott says that Smoque owner Barry Sorkin "has a finger on the pulse of barbecue. He offers barbecue from a lot of different regions, and he isn't afraid to tell customers when he's run out of something." Wiviott also praises Sorkin for his mastery of the Southern Pride smoker, which he calls "frankencues."

"Unless you've really honed your skills on the Southern Pride smoker, what you come out with is generic 'cue," he said.

Willie Wagner, owner of Honky Tonk



Ric Hess shows off a few of the barbecue offerings he created for the menu at Sheffield's, 3258 N. Sheffield. | RICHARD A. CHAPMAN-SUN-TIMES

BBQ in Pilsen (1213 W. 18th St., 312-226-7427, [www.honkytonkbbqchicago.com](http://www.honkytonkbbqchicago.com)), also exhaustively researched his barbecue recipes before specializing in Memphis-style barbecue. "I found myself just leaning toward traditional Tennessee barbecue, which uses a dry spice rub and lots of smoke to flavor the meat."

Wagner's road to opening Honky Tonk started with cooking barbecue in his backyard for his friends. Eventually, Wagner invested in a portable smoker that he hauled along the summer street fair circuit, selling briskets and ribs to attendees.

"My wife worked as a caterer and already had the kitchen [for Honky Tonk] built," Wagner said. He added a Southern Pride smoker and opened Honky Tonk in late September, quickly gaining a following through word-of-mouth and positive reviews on local food forums and blogs. At the recent World BBQ Championships in Memphis Wagner and local 'underground' chef Efrain

Cuevas were part of a team named "The Ques Brothers." The team earned a bronze trophy in the Championship Pork Shoulder category.

In the meantime, Wagner's catering business has grown to the point where he's cutting back on the number of festivals he'll be working this summer. "You can commit to a festival, and if the weather's bad or it falls on a long weekend, you're left with a lot of food you can't sell," Wagner said. "With a party of 150, I already know exactly to the dime how much I'll make."

When Ric Hess, owner of the popular Lakeview tavern Sheffield's (3258 N. Sheffield, 773-281-4989, [www.sheffieldschicago.com](http://www.sheffieldschicago.com)) decided to build a kitchen last year, he knew right away that he wanted to make good barbecue.

"I remember the first time I had brisket, visiting family in Dallas, and how the smoke flavor just engulfed it," Hess said. "Barbecue also ties in with the casual atmosphere and craft beers that we sell. We knew we wanted to

### SHEFFIELD'S MEMPHIS-STYLE BARBECUE SAUCE

MAKES 1 QUART

- 1/2 cup vegetable oil
- 1 pound onion
- 4 cloves garlic
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon nutmeg
- 2 teaspoons paprika
- 1 teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 2 teaspoons black pepper
- 2 bay leaves
- 1 (16-ounce) bottle Goose Island Bourbon County Stout
- 1 (28-ounce) bottle ketchup
- 2/3 cup molasses

Coat bottom of 3-quart saucepan in oil. Add onion and garlic and cook until translucent. Add spices (through bay leaves) and cook for five minutes.

Add beer and ketchup. Simmer 2 hours over low heat.

From Ric Hess  
Sheffield's

Nutrition facts per serving: 29 calories, 0 g fat, 0 g saturated fat, 0 mg cholesterol, 7 g carbohydrates, 0 g protein, 212 mg sodium, 0 g fiber

pair good beer and good barbecue together."

Hess bought a Southern Pride smoker, installed it in his office, researching and tweaking recipes as construction continued on the kitchen. "It still smells like smoke in the office," he said. By the time Sheffield's kitchen was completed, Hess had a menu ready. Sheffield's even makes their own barbecue sauces, using different Goose Island beers in each one.

What Sorkin, Wagner and Hess share, besides serving barbecue and exhaustive recipe research, is an emphasis on fresh ingredients. "In a sense, it ties in with the whole slow food movement," said Hess.

Other places throughout the North Side have noticed the success of Smoque and cast their lot with barbecue. Wiviott, however, is reluctant to call it a trend. "What truly separates these places that do barbecue right from the others is that they're committed to doing barbecue correctly."

Chuck Sudo is a Chicago-based freelance writer.

**Today in Travel:** Texans didn't invent barbecue, but don't say that out loud at Houston's World Championship Bar-B-Que Contest. Nearly 400 teams compete to see who can fire up the best brisket and other meat at this annual event, where the pit bosses take their cooking as seriously as their partying.

**Southern PRIDE**  
WOOD BURNING BBQ PITS & SMOKERS

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