



July 3, 2008

Barbecue at Big W's place is beyond finger lickin' good

*By Theresa J. Marquez
Poughkeepsie Journal*

Traveling down the road with the windows down, I could smell the smoke - aromatic, blissful smoke, tantalizing smoke. By the time we pulled up in front of this modest establishment, I was beginning to shake.

I had heard rumors about a man who set up a smoker daily on the side of the road somewhere in the netherlands of southern Dutchess County and who sold hot, smoked meats until he ran out. Then he would repeat the process the next day. Legend had it that people would drive for miles in hopes of arriving before the supply was sold out for the day.

He is real, real enough to have stood the test of time. Warren Norstein and family finally set up shop in a permanent dwelling to more consistently supply the smoky goodness we were about to enjoy.

It was a good thing the menu was simple and straightforward, as I was having a difficult time concentrating. Basically there are two decisions to make upon arriving: what kind of meat and how much. If you can't decide, order something from the "Try it All" menu, which provides a sampling of all three meat choices (beef, pork and chicken).

The menu is written on a chalkboard on the wall to the left as you walk in. It is divided into sandwiches, ribs, chicken, meat by the pound (pulled pork, pulled chicken, beef brisket) and the "Try it All." Available sides are listed as well as chili.

Pork ribs are dry rubbed with a proprietary blend of spices, then placed in a large tube-like smoker to linger and mingle with the heat and hickory smoke. They were tender fingers of moist, succulent shards of flesh lightly holding on to bone, not slathered in sauce but juicy just the same.

Crispy chicken

Chicken is also prepared in the same manner: dry spices rubbed in to the skin then placed in the smoker. These are available by the half or whole bird. I highly recommend indulging in the whole bird and plan on leftovers to be transformed into other meals.

Just this once, forget that chicken skin is supposed to be bad for you. What a way to go! It was crispy and tantalizing with the variety of spices used. They were sweet and savory at the same time, and better than finger lickin' good. Underneath the crackling layer of flavored skin was perfectly cooked chicken with a good hint of smoke flavor to entice. How many times have you had chicken that could be described as luscious?

Beef brisket can easily be a dish that serves up dry due to the lack of fat in this particular cut that typically fares better when braised. The brisket served to us was saturated in flavor and definitely not dry. In this particular dish it is much easier to see the visual clues of hot smoked meats. There should be a pink hue to the meat not to be confused with the pink center of rare meat. This was cooked through.

Pulled pork disappointing

The only real disappointment in the meat dishes was the pulled pork. Generally, pulled pork is such a luscious dish it is the first item devoured off of a combination plate. This was dry. None of the hot smoked meats is served drowned in sauce. It is served on the side - as it should be in traditional barbecue - to be added as desired. The dryness of the pork prompted us to dip into the accompanying sauces: regular house sauce and hot and spicy sauce. The spicy sauce built up in intensity as we indulged, which helped to reduce the heavy sour tartness of the vinegar backnotes evident in both sauces.

Sides with each meal

Sides come with each meal and we tasted the mac-n-cheese with anticipation. We hoped for homey, cheesy goodness. Instead it was thin in flavor and delivered disappointment. Side of greens varies from day to day. We enjoyed the slow roasted flavor of green cabbage. Smoky beans were just that, delightfully smoky from the generous addition of meat added to the almost squishy beans. Jasmine dirty rice was a mild savory dish of jasmine rice cooked and seasoned with a light hand. The warm spices within didn't overwhelm the aromatic sweetness of the jasmine.

Dessert is not something easily thought of after such an intense meal, but is available and will always vary. We were treated to a small dish of rice pudding that, although heavily laced with ground cinnamon, was enjoyable. It was dense, almost as thick as custard. Drinks are self-serve in this establishment. Beverages (soda, water, juice, etc.) are available from reach-in coolers in the back of the dining room.

Service is über casual, quick and familial. Place your order at the counter as you walk in, the same counter your meat will be sliced and diced on. Food will be brought out on trays almost before you can decide where to sit. Disposable flatware and paper bowls are available at the back of the room and on each table is a generous basket of napkins, of which you will need plenty.

Bound for a meat coma

When we placed our order, the proprietor asked, "Are you sure? That is going to be A LOT of food." Of course, completely taken in by our senses, our eyes were bigger than our stomachs. We also both considered ourselves major carnivores and were pretty sure we were up to the task. How much could it really be? When the proprietor stepped out from the back of the counter with a HUGE aluminum container of assorted meats, my guest almost passed out, my eyes bugged and I stammered "I'll follow you anywhere." A couple of men seated at the table across the room started to cheer. At the end of the meal, it was mentioned that for a couple of girls, we did a pretty good job putting it away.

By that time I was in a meat coma, a stupor of pure bliss. I was already thinking of smoked chicken quesadillas and my own pot of beans that my portion of the leftover pulled pork would be flavoring. I was also thinking of others I could bring out to enjoy such a bountiful, delicious feast. This is the kind of place you want to remember to bring a bib, your appetite and friends.
