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TANGY SAUCE AND SWEET TEA

The Smokehouse does Southern BBQ right BY JOHN LOCANTHI

Barbecue isn't the first thing that comes to mind when one thinks of Eugene. The city has a bevy of Asian and vegetarian restaurants, a few places offering a pulled-pork sandwich or perhaps babyback ribs, but the average Eugenean would be hard-pressed to name more than one or two restaurants offering authentic Southern barbecue. The Smokehouse Southern BBQ aims to change that perception.

"Whenever I came back to Oregon, the barbecue just wasn't the same," said Aaron Speck, owner of The Smokehouse.

Speck grew up in Eugene, attended Lane Community College and then headed down to Norman, Okla., to study meteorology. He had no idea how much his life would change.

He grew a taste for good old-fashioned Southern barbecue. Speck spent a year learning the art of smoking

meat at Harv's BBQ in Norman, then he began cooking for friends while tailgating on his lawn before Sooners football games. His pulled pork and brisket were a big success.

"I figured if my food was good enough for the Okies — people who know good barbecue — I should bring it back to Oregon with me," Speck said.

And he was right.

What started as a modest food cart along Highway 99 turned into a bustling little restaurant near campus. Speck has developed an excellent rapport with the customers, including a group of regulars that broke into a friendly argument over who had eaten more sandwiches since the place opened in January. And it's hard to see why someone wouldn't join in the competition.

The pulled pork and brisket are exceptionally tender, having been cooked for 20-plus hours before serving.

"We smoke it until it's tender enough to pull apart in

your hands," Speck said while pantomiming a smooth pulling gesture with a gleeful look in his eyes.

After ordering the meat, there are four sauces to choose from: a light, Carolina-style vinegar sauce, both mild and spicy barbecue sauces, and the "Smokehouse Sauce" made by combining an Alabama white sauce with the barbecue. All of the sauces are housemade, and all are delicious; they're a welcome reprieve from the overly sweet variety found around these parts. The Smokehouse sauce is delightfully tangy.

The barbecue is accompanied by a selection of typical sides, including cornbread made with real cornmeal, baked beans and a nice, light coleslaw.

The Smokehouse also offers a rarity in these parts: authentic sweet tea. It may seem like a simple drink to concoct, but most of the sweet teas available in grocery stores don't quite get the right feel and taste of the Southern delicacy.

Speck offers a very flexible catering service as well. He started it during the food cart and is continuing it with the restaurant. The Smokehouse offers its standard barbecues but will work with whatever kind and quality of meat the customer specifies. Whether it's an inexpensive slab of pork butt or some free range chickens, Speck will give it that authentic Southern treatment the establishment prides itself on.

"Barbecue is an art form," Speck said. "It takes time to learn and master, but when you get it right, there is nothing better." ■

The Smokehouse, 1239 Alder St., is open 11am-8pm M-F and noon-8pm Sa.; 343-2568.

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