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WHERE SLOPPY SECONDS IS A GOOD THING

There's a reason why Texas BBQ King runs out of napkins at 4 o'clock



» Lunch hour at the Original Texas Barbecue King is a most unlikely sight. In the northernmost tip of downtown, construction men along with office workers from every corner of the cubicle income divide line up to eat sweet, smoky, messy barbecue.

It's about to get even more unlikely when this ramshackle operation — ringed by five well-loved smokers — gets approximately 700 new neighbors once the Orsini III luxury condo complex opens across the street in the fall. We hope they'll love barbecue because on Sunset and Figueroa, midday is always hazy with the pungent aroma of hickory barbecue.

Barbecue King's smokers are true Texas style: 55-gallon drums sawed in half and turned on their sides, also known as Texas hibachis. Inside, brisket, chicken, ribs, pork loin and spicy sausage smoke for hours. The doors, equipped with welded-on handles, don't close tightly, so smoke pours out of them all day long.

It takes that long to get brisket, Texas barbecue's signature dish, tender and delicious. A lesser cut of beef, cowboys and ranchers once kept the brisket for themselves while they sold the pricier parts of the steer. Ideally, when a slice of it hits your plate the meat's so tender it falls apart on your fork. Barbecue King's doesn't reach that gold standard, but it's definitely this side of delicious. Especially when the meat's dipped into a pool of Barbecue King's syrupy sauce.

Texas barbecue isn't known for its sauce. In fact a simple salt and pepper rub is the tradition in the very first meat market smokers, but no one around these parts minds. The thick, sweet stuff coats all the meats, including the hot links.

Spicy sausage, or Peté's Links as Barbecue King calls them, is as special to Texas as brisket is. Spicy sausage came to the state by way of the German immigrants, who settled in Texas during the mid-1800s. They're deliciously fiery at Barbecue King, with a skin that pops as you bite it. The inside of these hot links are neither dry nor greasy and the pepper mixes nicely with the sweet sauce.

If the brisket isn't perfect, the tri-tip is almost there. Tender and seductive, you'll be hard-pressed to leave any on the plate. The chicken is soft and succu-

lent, as are the baby back ribs. There's plenty of pork on the ribs to make the mess you leave on your face worth it. But skip the beef ribs. There's not enough meat to balance out all the fat. And what's there requires far too much chewing.

But of course, no one goes to barbecue just for the barbecue. Grab a napkin — or 10 — wipe off those sticky fingers, and dig into some sides.

The baked beans here are the side-de-résistance. As in most of the dishes, sweetness is Barbecue King's main weapon. The noble bean holds its shape in the midst of the thick sauce, but still provides a good match for the barbecue.

The potato salad is sweet too, with a bit of relish. It's a mayonnaisy potato salad for sure, but doesn't have any of the overpowering taste of jarred mayonnaise. What it does have is a decadent, rich texture. And if you accidentally drop a little sauce in there, all the better. The coleslaw on the other hand, is simply too syrupy. In another context, with a salty fried fish per-

haps, the slaw might be a star. But paired with an already sweet barbecue sauce, my mouth wanted to be quenched by some lighter, tangier veggies. Both the macaroni & cheese and the cornbread were passable, good enough to sop up the sauce with anyway.

Ordinarily, I wouldn't bother with fries at a barbecue joint, but there happened to be a six-year-old in tow and he wanted

the hot dog combo. We shrugged and ordered the child his wish. The hot dogs were negligible, but the fries were amazing. Thick-cut and dusted with paprika, they were soft, crispy and oily (in a good way) in all the right places. Luckily for me there's only so much room in a six-year-old's tummy.

Now I've been to Barbecue King at lunch during the main hustle — lines into the parking lot, elbow to elbow at the picnic tables — but I really recommend it for dinner, or better yet, as Dodger game take-out. First of all there are far fewer people, so it's easier to find a spot for your car and your butt. But second, returning to work in a barbecue coma is all wrong. Barbecues are as much about leisure as about food, and what's the point if you can't wallow in the stickiness of it all? Only drawback — the napkin dispensers are just about empty after 4pm. **NA**

THE HOT CORNER »
» York Blvd. & Ave 50

» Fueled by the presence of affordable homes, Occidental College students and a thriving artist community, blue-collar Highland Park has become a hot neighborhood, and the intersection of York Boulevard and Avenue 50 is its hottest corner.

In July, Edendale Grill veterans Gabe Byer and Ryan Ballinger opened The York — a gastropub with exposed brick walls — in the former Wild Hare space. John Winkel, formerly of Ford's Filling Station, prepares a blackboard menu, including baby back ribs and blackened catfish. The York reflects and caters to the local the Latin community with cocktails like the Paloma, a traditional grapefruit-driven Mexican drink.

Local friends Zac Crandell and Reiko Roberts, tired of having to drive to imbibe, revived dormant neighborhood bar Johnny's in June. The Depression-era building last served as a transmissions storehouse, so the new owners added a brass bar and brown leather banquettes to update the look of this space. On one of Johnny's walls, bartenders project movies like *Barbarella* and *Down By Law*.

To supply food, Johnny's owners recruited neighbor El Chapin, a Guatemalan restaurant and bakery. By day, Lourdes Revas and husband Giovanni prepare traditional specialties. Thursday to Sunday nights, El Chapin delivers tacos, quesadillas, and Guatemalan tamales known as "chuchitos" to Johnny's customers, who order by walkie-talkie.

NELA Art hosts self-guided tours of local art spaces on alternate Saturday nights. Last month the corner was represented by MorYork Gallery, home to Clare Graham. This "recycled artist" collects and crafts Scrabble tile towers and bottlecap baskets.

Lourdes Revas summed up the corner: "We try to work together, to help each other. It's good for everybody."

— Joshua Lurie

» *The York*, 5018 York Blvd., Highland Park, 323-255-9675, www.theyorkonyork.com. Open 5 p.m. to 2 a.m. daily.

» *Johnny's*, 5006 York Blvd., Highland Park, Open 5 p.m. to 2 a.m. daily.

» *El Chapin*, 5010-5012 York Blvd., Highland Park, 323-254-8105, www.elchapinmarket.com

» *Northeast Los Angeles Arts Organization (NELA Art)* tours run from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m. For gallery night maps, visit www.NELAart.org.

» *MorYork Gallery*, 4959 York Blvd., Highland Park, 323-663-3426, www.claregraham.com/MorYork.html.