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A smoking side of local history

BY ADAM WILCOX

If sandwiches are trendy and noodles are hot, barbecue is positively smoking. Try getting a table at Dinosaur, and you know this. People can't get enough of smoked meats and sides. That's all good. As long as the deal is square and the experience decent, I can eat even mediocre barbecue.

The most recent barbecue hotspot is Sticky Lips in the extensively refurbished Kim's Carnival Creams location. True to form, the public is flocking. If Dinosaur is a place for downtown office workers to pretend that they're Bad, Sticky Lips wants to be the barbecue restaurant for everyone. It's quieter, has better parking, and is more family-friendly (although missing a children's menu).

Owner Howard Nielsen also owns Chester Cab, and has taken valuable lessons from that experience. In the '80s, while trying to franchise Chester Cab, he was under-financed. This time, with a name and some success to point to, he had no trouble securing loans, and Sticky Lips looks great. Nielsen has researched regional barbecue styles, but research isn't experience, and it'll take Sticky Lips a while to smooth all its edges. Right out of the chute, some things are very good, though.

The pulled pork, \$8.95 or \$10.95 with two sides, is dry-rubbed; cooked slowly in a big, old smoker; then sauced, if you want, before finishing. The smoky flavor goes deep, as it ought. Sticky Lips has several sauces. The All-American BBQ sauce has medium kick, is mildly sweet, and isn't overly thickened; I like that you can see its ingredients. The Cherry Bomb Brown sauce is thicker and sweeter, less spicy. Carolina Clipper Mustard sauce shows Nielsen's predilection for mustard.

You can get any meat with any of these sauces (as well as others for some). The ribs, which are very meaty and tender --- although a bit dry on one of my three visits --- are excellent charbroiled after a second spice rub, sans sauce (a big half rack is \$8.95/\$10.95, full racks are \$17.95/\$19.95). Sticky Lips suggests its "special vinegar sauce" for pulled pork, though it's not as sharp as this Georgia son would hope.

The menu is, perhaps, too long, though Nielsen says most of it is recombination. Many won't get past the section of Uncle Frank's State Fair Chicken. It's injected with cayenne and garlic, basted with Nielsen's Uncle Frank Ognibene's "secret recipe," and grilled over charcoal in a custom, smoker grill. The chicken is deeply flavorful, with a fabulous skin, though a bit dry on a couple of my visits (perhaps a function of being kept warm). A breast/wing or leg/thigh is \$4.95/\$6.95, while a half chicken is a screaming deal at \$6.95/\$8.95.

And what about those sides? Nielsen admires Dinosaur's breadth and quality here, and wanted to do as well with different items. The chili is great, with plenty of slightly smoky meat and beans, not swimming in tomato soup but alive with spice. The fries are hand-cut and well cooked. Be ready for mustard and a kick if you get the macaroni salad. I'm ecstatic at the inclusion of collards and black-eyed peas, even if they're a bit heavy on the molasses. The list goes on: black beans and rice, mashed potatoes, succotash, coleslaw, sweet potato fries, and even a hearty ratatouille. You'll make plenty of visits before getting bored.

As stated, the menu is long. If you can imagine appetizers in addition to all this, there are grilled drumsticks, freshly fried nachos (with the great chili), and somewhat overly battered catfish strips and fried green tomatoes. Then there are soups, salads, and piles of sandwiches featuring grilled chicken breasts, pulled pork, beef brisket, and even salmon. My BBQ bacon cheddar burger came medium rare as ordered, and was excellent. The "Painted Ladies" (smaller) and "Flying Fortresses" (larger) sections of the menu give you combinations of meats. There are even three vegetarian dinner selections.

It's a big operation, and service was unpredictable, though always friendly. Desserts, made by Nielsen's cousin Martha Ognibene, are excellent, including key lime and pecan pie. The building itself is a real star. Originally a Nash car dealership, then later Culver Dodge, it became a Carvel in the '60s. Nielsen uncovered a gorgeous tin ceiling, then built the second floor. A history buff --- he produced the film *When Football Was Bigger than Life*, about the heyday of Aquinas High School football --- Nielsen covers the walls with local history, period magazines, and posters.

Howard Nielsen has a very attractive restaurant going. I'd bring my family, co-workers, my band, or anybody. He is a smart businessman, and if not everything is running like a top, my guess is that he'll fix the little problems over time. It's a fun and cool place.

Sticky Lips Pit BBQ, 625 Culver Road, 288-1910. Hours: Monday to Saturday, 11 a.m. to 10 p.m.; Sunday, 1 to 8 p.m.