

The Washington Post

Democracy Dies in Darkness

The excellent Alexandria barbecue joint that (almost) got away

By **Tim Carman**

Dec. 10, 2019 at 9:30 a.m. EST

Every year, without fail, my annual barbecue guide generates the kind of commentary that you'd expect from those who glorify their favorite smoked meats like a religion and view all who don't as dirty infidels. One reader suggested that Federalist Pig in Adams Morgan doesn't deserve a spot on my list and then wrote, without apparent irony or humor, that he (why do I assume it's a dude?) doesn't "eat in DC because I can't carry there."

He essentially called my survey a barbecue guide for snowflakes. I'd challenge him to a fight, but that would mean I'd have to put down my Cronut and caramel macchiato.

They're not all haters, of course. Many readers ask, in all earnestness, why a certain place didn't make the cut or suggest a joint that they assume I had missed. In most cases, we simply disagree on the merits of a place, or they're recommending a spot too far outside my purview. (Sure, great barbecue is worth a road trip — it almost *demands* one — but perhaps not one that requires two hours.)

This year, though, several readers (and the owner of the place himself) asked why Smoking Kow BBQ didn't crack my top 10. I assure you there's a very good reason for its omission: Until recently, I had never set foot in the original Alexandria location, nor its second shop in Arlington (2910 N. Sycamore St.). For reasons I can't begin to explain, I didn't even have Smoking Kow on my list of barbecue shops to scout this year.

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Once I completed a full course of ritual self-flogging, I decided to rectify the situation. Consider this column a mea culpa to fans of Smoking Kow, to owner Dylan Kough and to Washington barbecue hounds in general. This place is good, at least the original location, which is the focus of this review. It's top 10 good, for sure. Is it top-five good? Not yet. Not until Smoking Kow can stand on its two feet without Kough's steadying hand. (More on that in a minute.)

Kough's path to professional barbecue wound through the smoke-free zone of a Big Four accounting firm. A graduate of the University of Maryland, with degrees in finance and accounting, Kough felt as trapped as a brisket on an 18-hour smoke when he was employed at KPMG. He eventually used his business smarts to launch the Smoking Kow food truck, which debuted on the streets in 2015 with meats smoked at Union Kitchen, the culinary incubator. You could say Kough was too sick for corporate life. He had contracted the barbecue bug, its symptoms familiar to anyone who has ever tried to smoke slabs of meat in the backyard, striving for perfection in an imperfect world.

As a budding pitmaster who grew up without a fixed position on the American barbecue map — Bethesda, clearly, doesn't have a style or even a single decent smokehouse — Kough was free to find an approach that suited his palate. He landed on Kansas City style with its burnt ends (the Kow offers up good, crusty implosions of fat) and tomato-based sauces that strike a democratic balance between acid and sugar. Kough's original sauce is a turbocharged example of the style: Its apple cider vinegar announces its presence with authority, only to discover that the molasses and brown sugar are not intimidated by it. They end up speaking with equal voices in this terrific sauce.

Kough clearly puts a lot of effort into his sauces. Too bad you don't really need them on many of the meats pulled from his Ole Hickory rotisserie smoker, a hybrid gas-and-wood-burning unit. On some level, Kough must be aware of this fact. Breaking from tradition at some (though not all) of K.C.'s famous smokehouses, the pitmaster serves up meat without sauce, an act that seemingly moves his operation's center of gravity further south, somewhere around Central Texas, where they're not so keen on sauce. But Kough prefers to let customers decide for themselves: to sauce or not to sauce.

The first time I tried Smoking Kow's brisket, it was seriously on point. Roughly chopped into moist chunks, the brisket had the kind of robust smokiness that you'd expect from meats cooked in a 1,000-gallon offset, not a gasser. The exterior bark, which glistened like stars in the nighttime sky, didn't have the black-pepper bite of Lone Star State brisket, but something more complex. A little sweet. A little spicy. A lot more subdued than the loud, bullhorn honk of classic Texas brisket. I would have preferred slices over this inelegant pile of meat, but I understood Kough's rationale: The chopped beef allows him to sneak more flavor and richness into the brisket, which might otherwise cause alarm among diners who howl in protest over a half-inch ribbon of rendered fat along the top of their slices.

My favorite meat at Smoking Kow may be its chicken, a notoriously difficult animal to smoke. Kough solves the problem by relying on boneless, skinless thighs, which remain juicy even after their long, dry bath in hickory smoke. Peppery, smoky and succulent, this pulled chicken makes a strong argument for higher consideration among classic barbecue proteins. I like Kough's approach to ribs — baby backs, in this case, the pitmaster's preferred bones — which are crackly and caramelized with a butter-and-brown-sugar glaze. I just wish they were a tad meatier. His pulled pork, I find, works best when wrapped in a toothsome housemade flour tortilla and packed with chipotle aioli and coleslaw. It's overindulgence at its finest.

Smoking Kow serves up the usual sides, save for one that rarely graces barbecue menus: cheesy jalapeño grits, which Kough describes as his “least-selling side, for sure.” I'd like to use the power of this platform to turn that statistic on its head: Sharp with cheddar and animated with the umami rush of roasted garlic, these grits should be required eating at the Kow. *For sure.* For a lighter accompaniment, try the collard greens, splashed with tamari, or the Texas caviar, a cool and crisp salad of black beans and roasted corn, both a satisfying way to balance out all the barbecue. They'll also help you save room for the salted caramel bourbon banana pudding, a dessert that believes anything worth doing is worth overdoing.

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On my final visit, I ordered the chopped brisket atop the house mac and cheese prepared with the corkscrew pasta known as cavatappi. Underseasoned and without any discernible smoke, the brisket was closer to pot roast than barbecue. It also was prepared without the assistance of Kough, who was gone over the weekend in question. This is a common problem when people bitten by the barbecue bug open smokehouses: It's hard for them to teach others to be just as obsessive.

If you go

Smoking Kow BBQ

3250 Duke St., Alexandria, 703-888-2649; smokingkowbbq.com.

Hours : 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Sunday, and Tuesday through Thursday; 11 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday.

Nearest Metro : Eisenhower Avenue, with a 1.4-mile trip to the restaurant.

Prices: \$3 to \$17 for platters, sandwiches, tacos and sides; \$14 to \$27 for ribs and meats by the pound.

Tim Carman

Tim Carman is a food reporter at The Washington Post, where he has worked since 2010. Previously, he served for five years as food editor and columnist at Washington City Paper.

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Larico Harley 2 months ago

It sounds like the place is only worth visiting when the owner is around. I guess there is no way to tell until you receive your order. They need one of the signs like Krispy Kreme or maybe just close down when he isn't around.

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The Flying Spaghetti Monster 2 months ago

I always recommend The Pit Stop in Sterling.

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The Flying Spaghetti Monster 2 months ago *(Edited)*

Smoking Know is really good barbecue. But the Duke Street location is in some serious need of parking spaces.

Like 👍1 Link ↻ Report 🚩



edobson22207 2 months ago

I enjoy the discussion and opinions on BBQ – it is all quite subjective. Understood.

I'll have to try out Smoking Kow on Duke Street.

i've been to Sycamore Street and enjoy it. Mostly. about 90% of the time the BBQ is spot on.

But the staff is about 100% checked-out. I actually have stopped going because I just don't want to deal with the staff. I appear to be annoying them that I stopped in and then I neglect to remind myself that they are doing me a favor by taking my order.

Staff at McDonalds is more friendly, helpful and engaging.

So I struggle because the BBQ is pretty darn good.

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Ettore Gina 2 months ago

Very important information for future customers to know. That kind of behavior toward customers is unacceptable for any restaurant.

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Zyxt00 2 months ago *(Edited)*

Smoking Kow must have its great days and terrible days. I've had good pork there, but the chicken was desert-dry (flavorful, but so, so dry) and their mac n' cheese was mushy and lacking in any flavor at all. Kraft would have been an improvement. The collard greens are bizarrely sweet, like sitting in candy sauce sweet. Their bbq sauce selection is nice but you can't save bad bbq with good sauce. This place needs work.

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bierbelly again 2 months ago *(Edited)*

Carolina Bros in Ashburn has very good pulled pork. But they try to be everything to everybody by serving the sauces on the side. The Carolina BBQ sauce is bland...and no hushpuppies.

Buy a pound, take it home and make your own sauce. Tobasco w apple cider vinegar is almost perfect.

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fa123456 2 months ago

Awesome review, ought to get you a writing award. Hats off to Mr Carman.

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Masked Banana 2 months ago

Metro DC is never going to be Texas, Memphis, St. Louis, E. NC, W. NC, SC Mustard, K.C., AL White Sauce, etc. BBQ. Just like you won't find Hudson Valley Chili Dogs in Kentucky.

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Sneakyfeets 2 months ago

We have an awful lot of people from an awful lot of places in DC – and they bring their cooking styles with them. Lucky us!!

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8stringfan 2 months ago

I wish they'd served me the first brisket you described. Instead, I think i got the second. When I went they served me a dry, flavorless mess of gray meat that had been pulled. Yes...PULLED brisket! The sauce couldn't save it. I ate a few burnt ends, some mac 'n cheese, and tossed everything else, including most of the brisket. I rarely throw away food, but what they served me at Smoking Kow was really bad.

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mookie11 2 months ago

Did You miss Hardy's in Bethesda ? Best ribs around. What about Texas Ribs and BBQ in Clinton? They have been there 25 years and their. brisket is pretty darn good. Award winning!

Like 1 Link Report



RapBrown 2 months ago *(Edited)*

Texas Ribs in Clinton, Md., their free peanuts alone are worth the visit .

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IceHippoDC 2 months ago

I live in Bethesda, and had never heard of Hardy's until now. I'll check them out ASAP, thanks.

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Boomerldy 2 months ago

Usually in the parking lot of the Bethesda Farm Women's Market. Irregular schedule. They have a restaurant in Bowie and cater.

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