

The Softer Side of Oak Cliff's Smoke

There's more to life than The Big Rib.



When **Smoke** landed on a hill in Oak Cliff in 2009, people assumed a barbecue restaurant had tucked itself in behind the Belmont Hotel. It was a logical assumption, since Smoke was more than just a name. It billowed from the kitchen, enveloping beef ribs in a gentle embrace until the fat in them softened and quivered at the touch. Customers gnashed at spare ribs with their teeth and shoveled up sides like potato salad and macaroni and cheese.

Five years later, the reputation still holds. If you grab a seat at the bar, you're as likely to be flanked by a diner sawing through a tender slice of brisket and palming a can of Shiner beer as you are to catch *Smokey and the Bandit* playing on the big screen. The dining room reeks of smoldering oak and hickory, and there's brown butcher paper carefully draped over the tables.

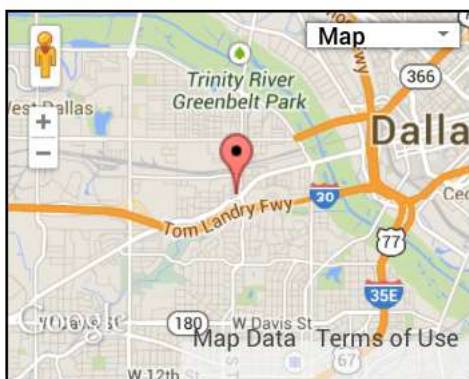
Choose to embrace the theme and you'll likely have a memorable meal. The famed Big Rib, a massive hunk of tender smoky meat served on the bone, is a fantastic take on Texas-style barbecue. Chef Tim Byres plates the beef with an equally rich hominy casserole, and he brightens it all with a vibrant chimichurri and a parsley salad that looks like it was ripped from the garden just before it was tossed on the plate.



The Big Rib

Catherine Downes

Location Info



Smoke

901 Fort Worth Ave.
Dallas, TX 75208

Category: Bars and Clubs

But when Byres was first asked by partner Chris Jeffers to open a barbecue restaurant, he countered with what he called a firewood restaurant. A long-time student of fine dining and a recent disciple of Stephan Pyles, Byres was all too ready to ditch his chef's jacket, but he wanted Smoke to retain the refinement and artistry he'd honed over his career in kitchens. Sure, there could be smoked brisket on the menu, but the pickles that accompany it would be made on-site, along with a warm potato salad flecked with mustard seeds and chiles good enough to eat alone. The jams and barbecue sauces would be handcrafted too, and the breads would be baked in the same kitchen. All of this would be anchored by the spitting embers of burning wood, an unpredictable and primal heat source that has since defined Byres' cooking.

It's all on display through large windows that open up the kitchen to the outside. You can watch as sooty flames lap at the sides of a stockpot perched on the grill, and billows puffing from the smoker get inhaled by the vent hood above. It is a kitchen that belongs outdoors, but it's all carefully contained inside, and it's filled with buzzing cooks who not only turn out really great barbecue but, as Byres so hoped, also deliver some delicate and beautiful cooking.

Get the pulled pork if you want, but don't let it keep you from fawning over the shrimp cocktail, whose trio of shrimps are laced with spice and

Details

Smoke

901 Fort Worth Ave., 214-393-4141,
smokerestaurant.com. 8 a.m.-3 p.m., 5-10
p.m. Sunday-Thursday; 8 a.m.-3 p.m., 5-11
p.m. Friday-Saturday. \$\$\$\$

Shrimp cocktail **\$11**

Whole fish **\$26-\$30 (MP)**

Cabrito and masa **\$13**

Quail **\$23**

Big Rib **\$30**

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charred until they're blackened with crackling tails. Eat them heads and all, mixed with forkfuls of whole parsley leaves and a vinegary pickle relish, and see if you don't lament that there wasn't just one more shrimp.

Order the spare ribs, sure. But be sure to check out the guanciale plated with spicy mustard and pickles that when eaten together mimic a punchy vinaigrette. The cheek meat from the pig tastes a lot like bacon, cooked crisp in parts and tender and chewy in others.

You shouldn't pass up the quail, either. It's grilled until it's somehow both juicy and blackened, and served on a bed of Swiss chard and chickpeas that screams with lemon. Just like that you're in the backyard, eating Dad's grilled chicken.

There's a lot of nostalgia in Byres' cooking, actually; he admits he's in constant competition with the flavor memories of his diners. Every

night, his mac and cheese competes with the baked noodle casseroles on so many childhood dinner tables, while his pie crust goes toe to toe with the work of countless grandmothers and aunts.

To keep up, Byres makes use of big flavors and rustic techniques, and looks deep within his own kitchen to hunt for inspiration. Instead of dissecting the tasting menus and dishes of other prominent chefs for ideas, Byres turns inward, looking to his own staff to spur creativity. Cooks prepare family meals for the rest of the staff, offering bits and pieces of their own culinary heritage that slowly work their way into the menu.

Masa became a part of Smoke's arsenal after a dishwasher prepared tacos for the rest of the kitchen. Now it's made fresh daily and used in tamales and a cabrito dish that will challenge your favorite Mexican food memories. The cabrito (a young goat) is cooked down into a rich, flavorful stew, and tucked inside a thick disk of soft, fresh masa like an over-sized pupusa. It sits in a sweet puddle of cajeta sauce that juxtaposes the tangy salsa verde draped over the top. It's an original take on regional cooking that pays homage to the flavors of Texas and Mexico viewed through Byres' unique lens.

If you leave Smoke with the top button of your jeans undone, it's your own fault. There's plenty of subtlety available for what some still view as a barbecue restaurant. A salad of young lettuces and herbs is refreshing, with leaves of mint and parsley, dill sprigs and a dressing of smoke-kissed vinaigrette. There's a fish that's roasted whole, and stuffed with onions and peppers that lend their aromatics. There are seared scallops, too. All of these dishes embrace a simplicity that's hard to find in Dallas. And they're assembled in a wood-burning kitchen that's outfitted with rustic equipment like no other in the country.

When Byres left Stephan Pyles, he could have dialed his cooking up. That was the approach another of Pyles' protégés, Matt McCallister, took when he opened FT33 and it's been proven to work brilliantly. But instead of delving into the modern and abstract, Byres dialed things back, embracing a style of cooking that values heritage and quality. He serves up a riff on boudin, the same humble sausage that's sold in gas stations all over Louisiana. Byres' version is smoked, of course. Inspired by rustic Texas roasts, he wood-grills oysters and tops them with a roasted pepper purée and bits of chorizo. From countless rural, small-town restaurants fighting to not get squashed by Applebee's, he borrowed a simplistic approach and a service model focused on hospitality. The results are a unique take on regional cooking that makes Dallas a better dining city.



You can have a fine smoked meat experience at Smoke, complete with canned beer, potato salad and a slice of pie for dessert, but if all you experience is barbecue when you visit, you're missing almost everything. That smoky, brutish environment of a kitchen is turning out delicate and refined cooking that provides a window into the regional culinary DNA, and makes a subtle nod to a restaurant model that's on the endangered species list. Don't miss the pulled pork with red vinegar on a soft, floppy bun — it is a sandwich that will conjure true happiness. But don't let the barbecue overshadow this experience, which should require more than a nap and a wet-nap to forget.

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