



BBQ Review

Big W 's Bar-B-Q

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The Joint

Namesake pitmaster Warren Norstein started Big W's Bar-B-Q by selling just ribs and a few sides late afternoons at a roadside operation on Route 22 in Pawling. Word gradually spread within the barbecue community and on sites like Roadfood and Chowhound, and Ed Levine declared in the New York Times that Big W's ribs were the best he tasted within 90 miles of New York City. With a steady following, Big W's in December 2006 moved on up (a few miles north, that is) to a full-fledged restaurant a in Wingdale.

When you pull up to Big W's, you're likely to see a big pile of wood, the now-obsolete Big W's vending truck and plenty of smoke billowing from the two smokers inside a protective shed to the side of the building. The joint itself is spacious but low-key: just a meat counter, a display case full of sides, a few booths and a few more tables. There's no décor to speak of and no bar (BYOB is an option). Service is over-the counter and the menu is simple, with just the basic four of spare ribs, pulled pork, brisket and barbecued chicken. There are two kinds of chili and a few different sides.

The Meats

On my first visit for a weekday lunch, I started with the pulled pork sandwich (\$10). The mountain of meat dwarfed the open-faced bun beneath it and drew awe-filled stares and comments from several customers. Served without sauce, the pork was composed of mostly large, tender chunks that were moist and lightly smoky, with the same texture as turkey thighs. The flavor, much like the room, was refreshingly simple and straightforward. What I tasted was pork, and it was good. I may have had better—though not that many—but I've never had a bigger pulled pork sandwich.

I discarded much of the pulled pork sandwich so that I could move on to a "Try It All" combo (\$20) "for one hungry person" that includes a quarter rack of ribs, a quarter chicken, your choice of pulled pork or brisket (I chose the latter) and one side. On my second visit, I started with chili, then got the same combo for comparison.

Watching Norstein carve the meats and assembling the combo into a Styrofoam container is half the fun. He first cuts the rib tips off as one long piece spanning all of the bones in the rack, then proceeds to slice the bones and cut the rib



A storefront replaces the roadside operation. There are two smokers in the shed.



A simple setup, with a few booths and tables.

tips, which he piles over the ribs. The ribs were moist, very tender—a little too tender the first time—and quite flavorful. Much like the pulled pork, the dominant flavor was the meat, not spice or sauce. The second visit, early on a Saturday night, bore much better ribs, with a perfect texture, plenty of juices, a crisp outer bark and wonderfully porky flavor. I really enjoyed those ribs, though probably not as much as Ed Levine.

Super-tender brisket was a little on the fatty side the first time I tried it and loaded with fat the second time, but the portion is so generous there's still plenty left after trimming. The smoke ring was evident and the flavor was simple: beef.

My portion of slow chicken was good on the second visit and the highlight of the combo on my first visit. The skin was slightly crisp, the meat was moist and the flavor, aided by a light application of mop, was intense. I'd easily rank Big W's chicken among my top handful for the region.

The Appetizers / The Chili

There aren't any appetizers here unless you count the chili, and here it counts for a lot. Beef chili featured smoked brisket and not much else to get in the way. There was just enough spice to let you know it's chili, but the brisket itself was the star of the show. The chunks were large, the bark was plentiful and the

fat that's abundant on the brisket entrée was conveniently removed. It's a great way to sample the brisket when you've ordered a sandwich or platter that doesn't include it. Chicken chili supplied large chunks of chicken mingled with lighter threads. The flavor, though lightly smoky and faintly piquant, was pure chicken. Much like a vine ripe tomato that reminds you what tomatoes used to taste like, this chili screams chicken. I could see this chili inside a chicken pot pie. I could also see myself downing a bowl of it every day throughout the winter if I lived nearby.

The Sauces

All meats are served unsauced, with a container of house-made barbecue sauce on the side. It's an unusual blend of plums, onions and spices that reminded me of a kicked up version of Chinese duck sauce. It's quite different from the traditional style of barbecue sauce, but it works when applied in small doses, especially on the ribs and the chicken. The house-made hot sauce is a habanero-infused version of the barbecue sauce. I liked it a lot on the ribs and the chicken, less so on the other meats and not at all in the chili.

The Sides

Sides were good. Beans were fairly ordinary in flavor but were packed with bits of rib meat, pulled pork and brisket. Jasmine rice was a sticky, Thai-influenced variety that's unusual for a barbecue joint. I liked it.

The bottom line: Although I generally prefer a higher level of spice, I found the meats at Big W's not only excellent, but possibly the best bang for the barbecue buck anywhere in New York. It's sure to be a hit with everyone, and if you like your meats unsauced and natural, it's good for extra bases.



Ribs, the signature item here and the only meat from the original roadside days.



The pulled pork sandwich is a mountain of meat.



The sauce is unusual, made from plums and onions.



Ribs, brisket and chicken from my first visit.



Chicken.



A close look at the chicken.



Brisket.



Ribs, brisket and chicken from my second visit.



Ribs.



Another look at the ribs.



A close look at the rib tips from the first visit.



A rack of ribs, with the rib tips.



The rib tips are separated and cut into smaller pieces that get included.



Beans, with brisquet, pulled pork and rib meat.



Brisket is fatty...



... but there's plenty of good meat after trimming.



Brisket chili.



Chicken chili.



Thai-style Jasmine rice.



Cabbage was the green special of the day.



When they're out, they're out.



Big W is Warren Norstein.