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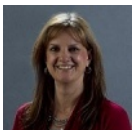
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Posted on August 7, 2013 10:00 am by Howard Seftel

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ABOUT HOWARD SEFTEL

Howard Seftel, who writes the Feed Back blog, has been reviewing restaurants and covering the Valley dining scene for more than 20 years. He has been The Arizona Republic's restaurant critic since 1999. Prior to his journalism career, Seftel did graduate work in American and Middle Eastern history at the University of California, Berkeley. He later taught there, as well as at Antioch University in Los Angeles. His fascination with food began in

Bootleggers Boosts Restaurant-Challenged Neighborhood

The area around 32nd Street and Shea Boulevard seems to have it all: a great location, 15 minutes from Scottsdale and downtown Phoenix; top-notch schools; low crime; pleasant parks; and a nearby Trader Joe's, Whole Foods and farmer's market.

What the neighborhood doesn't have are destination restaurants. Believe me, I should know - I've lived here for 23 years.

Bootleggers, a new strip-center spot focusing on barbecue, can't really be called a destination restaurant, either. But it's certainly a huge upgrade over the storefront's precious occupant, the Dirty Drummer.

Owner Rick Phillips is a restaurant blogger who's not afraid to put his money where his mouth is. (He's at eateraz.com, which is part of azcentral.com's network of community bloggers.)

There's an extensive menu, overseen by chef James Fox, whose resume includes stints with Matt Carter at Zinc Bistro and the Mission. He's doing more down-home fare here: appetizers like nachos (\$10), rock shrimp and grits (\$9) and a bacon board (\$14); entrees like filet (\$23), grilled salmon (\$18) and roast chicken (\$14); and a variety of burgers and sandwiches.

But I stopped in for the barbecue. And I'd have no hesitation

New York City, where the Big Apple's ethnic cuisines and fine-dining opportunities expanded both his childhood waistline and culinary horizons. Extensive traveling broadened those horizons: he spent five years abroad, first as a Peace Corps volunteer in Africa, and later as an English teacher in pre-revolutionary Iran. He can't definitively say what his favorite food is. But he does believe that without bread and cheese, life has no meaning.

about coming back for it.

In barbecue circles, they say that beef brisket is the ultimate barbecue test. Bootleggers aces this exam. The hickory-smoked brisket (\$12, half pound) is fantastic, with the right amount of fat to optimize its beefy, tender and juicy qualities.

Pulled pork (\$8, half pound), is just about in the same class. Although pork doesn't pack the flavor punch of beef, the smoky char is pretty much irresistible.

There's nothing wrong with the St. Louis-style ribs (\$16, half rack), either – they're a meaty crew. It's just that these bones aren't quite as distinctively delicious as the brisket and pork.

My barbecue came with three sauces on the side. Two are quite sharp: one fashioned with Dr Pepper, is like sweet and sour molasses whose heat creeps up on you. The other is in-your-face spicy and tangy. A little bit of either goes a long way. I preferred the milder sauce, which had an appealing blend of flavors without the overwhelming kick.

The kitchen gets a bit creative with the sides. Of course, there are standards like cole slaw (\$3) and mac and cheese (\$5) – they're fine, if nothing special. But Bootleggers offers tastier, more nutrient-dense alternatives, like kale (\$5) and cauliflower (\$4).

Be aware, however, that the nutrients come at caloric cost. But who cares? The kale is fragrantly goosed up with brown butter, peanuts, ham and raisins, while the cauliflower is teamed with grilled onions, coated with melted cheese and sprinkled with pretzel bread crumbs.

Details: Bootleggers, 3375 E. Shea Blvd., Phoenix, 602-996-4228, bootleggersaz.com.

Just watch: Howard will have last laugh

Richard Obert

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