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# Bootleggers Brings the BBQ Renaissance to Phoenix

By **Laura Hahnfeld** Thursday, Aug 1 2013 Comments (0)

Given the handful of decent barbecue joints in the Valley, chasing the aroma of smoked meat is a little like finding relief during a Phoenix summer: There are moments of satisfaction, but for the most part, it's a losing battle.

So it is both surprising and fortuitous that a place like Bootleggers would come about. In the corner of a North Phoenix strip mall at 32nd Street and Shea Boulevard, the three-month-old restaurant (formerly the Dirty Drummer) is a welcome addition not only to the neighborhood but to a scene that seems to be missing out on the barbecue renaissance happening in cities such as New York and Los Angeles.

And (bonus) this satisfying 'cue joint's got a thirst for cocktails.

Like a barbecue pit gone the way of a gastropub, Bootleggers is the kind of place where a half-pound of sliced brisket can be paired with a well-crafted Old Fashioned served up in a mason jar; cold-smoked chicken wings can be chased with gourmet jelly shots; and a griddled pork belly sandwich is at home next to a craft brew, a glass of wine, or a dangerously smooth offering of housemade apple pie moonshine.

No strangers to the worlds of barbecue, Bootleggers owners are first-time restaurateur Rick Phillips, co-writer of the food blog EaterAZ and the man behind the Arizona Taco and Arizona BBQ festivals, and competition-circuit pit-master Kevin Slade, who brought in his Southern Pride Smoker to do the heavy lifting.

The two recruited onetime T. Cook's mixologist Jason Horton to preside over the bar and James Fox, formerly of Arcadia's Milagro Grill, to helm the kitchen. To further add to the firepower, they enlisted the help of another barbecue hound and all-around master of grilled meat, chef Matt Carter (Zinc Bistro, The Mission, The House), to help create the menu, which, along with 'cue, features upscale pub grub like burgers, salads, and entrées such as grilled salmon and an 8-ounce filet.

Of all the long-cooked meats Bootleggers kicks out, one of the best might be the beef brisket, a



Jackie Mercandetti

The Bootlegger Burger, a hulking tower of meat, cheese, mushrooms, and sauce, is a very good choice here.

**Details**

BootleggersBacon Board.....\$16

PBLT (pork belly sandwich)... \$11  
Sliced beef brisket.....\$12  
Smoked turkey leg..... \$8  
E-mail [laura.hahnfeld@newtimes.com](mailto:laura.hahnfeld@newtimes.com).  
Bootleggers  
3375 East Shea Boulevard  
602-996-4228  
[www.bootleggersaz.com](http://www.bootleggersaz.com)  
Hours: 11 a.m. to 1 a.m. daily

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hunk of 14-hour hickory-smoked steer with a deep smoke ring and a dark peppery crust. You can have it by the half-pound in long, tender strips lightly brushed with a sweet sauce. It's served with warm, folded tortillas and a very good crunchy slaw of roasted garlic and cider vinaigrette, but you might as well add a side of creamy, Parmesan-crust mac 'n' cheese or chunky potato salad studded with pickles because the brisket most likely will disappear more quickly than you expected. There's a sandwich option as well. And for starters, the brisket chili will probably be tangier than you'd like, but the smoky and spicy Nacho Flat — featuring chopped brisket hash strewn over crispy, brown-tinged tortillas along with roasted jalapeños, avocado relish, and a chipotle cheddar sauce that reaches into every crevice on the plate — is just about as good as it gets.

There is excellent turkey as well, so lusciously tender and deeply smoked that it takes on an almost porcine-like flavor. You could choose to add it to a salad or have it layered with white cheddar, salty bacon, and arugula over griddled sourdough as an outstanding open-faced melt. In its purest of forms, it is served as a giant turkey leg, a Flintstone-like affair with a crispy skin delicately coated in a barbecue sauce of honey and bourbon. The first few bites may be accompanied by knife and fork, but chances are it won't be long until your inner caveman (or woman) takes over, picking up the mammoth drumstick to gnaw, tear, and suck the remaining flesh from the bone.

If, unlike the ones I was served, your St. Louis ribs are meaty and not overcooked, they are also an option for barbecue, as is an acceptable slow-roasted pulled pork that, although meltingly tender, might benefit from a bolder sauce.

Like so many restaurants these days, Bootleggers serves pork belly, but given its cache of stellar, slow-cooked offerings, here it feels less like a novelty act and more a part of the program. Smoked for 10 hours, the deliciously fatty meat, lit up with spicy aioli, beefsteak tomato, and onions between toasty pieces of sourdough, bulks out what is not only the best sandwich on Bootleggers' stellar sandwich menu, but one of the most memorable in the Valley — the PBLT.

And for those who really dig the pig, there's the Bacon Board. A kind of salty and smoky homage to one of the country's longest-running food trends, the sampler offers five kinds of bacon, including the pork belly, on a wooden altar along with sweet onion jam, whole-grain mustard, house-brined gherkins, and cheesy toast to dip or mix as you please. The concept may be a bit absurd, but it's tasty and fun nonetheless. And you'd be hard-pressed to think of an appetizer that would go over more enthusiastically with friends.

There are more sophisticated offerings — a well-herbed roasted chicken (if you're into that sort of thing) and an unfortunately tough wedge of short rib over fried cole slaw that sounds more intriguing than it tastes — but they are less successful than Bootleggers' better barbecue and

upscale bar food selections. Case in point: the Bootlegger Burger.

A hulking tower of gooey Muenster cheese, onions caramelized in whiskey, bacon, mushrooms, and a tangy sauce atop a well-seasoned, half-pound patty on a pretzel bun, the Bootlegger, your friendly server will rightly say — along with the PBLT — is a very good choice here. And the signature burger's size, plus the addition of a few handfuls of light and crispy housemade chips, means it easily can feed two. Not a bad thing to know if you're planning on tasting on a few satisfying apps beforehand, like smoky wings in a spicy and citrusy sauce or crispy shrimp and grits studded with sausage bits over a basil purée.

Chances are you'll smell the efforts of Slade's Southern Pride Smoker before you actually see it sitting behind glass near the bar. Within a smartly dressed yet comfortable room of distressed brick and reclaimed wood, the smoker's heady aromas hang lazily in the air, as much a part of the atmosphere as the din of conversation or the glowing clusters of mason jar lights.

Before you know it, you're seated in a leather booth or in front of an aluminum tabletop, and there is barbecue before you — then, there isn't. You'd swear it vanished into thin air. But maybe that's the moonshine talking.

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