

SMOKEY JOE'S

★★★ EXCELLENT! ★★★

The Record

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We were practically face-down in the barbecue sampler plate at Smokey Joe's in Teaneck, sauce clinging to our hands in a rather uncivilized fashion. So when a manager came by and asked if everything was good, we just nodded until he left.

"Good?" asked my co-worker incredulously. "I'm going to go sleep in the brisket pan and mop up all the ends." I wasn't far behind. The brisket slices were thick, moist and tender, smoked for 12 hours and rimmed with the most delectable crispy ends.

The mellow orange-hued Cedar Lane double storefront that gave us this bounty is the only glatt kosher barbecue joint in the country that serves authentic, slow-cooked, pit-smoked barbecue, according to Smokey Joe himself, a passionate self-proclaimed foodie named Joe Kessler-Godin. He used to own a kosher café in Manhattan and still owns Kosher Creations, a catering company, but he's always wanted to own restaurants. "If I have any chance to make my living in this world, I'd like to do it through food," he said.

And in March 2007, he decided to do that by opening the 90-seat barbecue and Tex-Mex restaurant that got its name when a friend of Kessler-Godin's came up on him grilling in the backyard and exclaimed, "Smokey Joe!" Back in the open kitchen is a smoker that holds 300 pounds of meat, and Kessler-Godin can talk for a while about the drama involved in getting that sucker off the truck and into the restaurant.

Cherry, oak and apple wood are used, depending on which meat is being smoked. And the juicy, delicately smoked chicken (\$16.95) and thick, tender beef short ribs (\$20.95 to \$29.95) are smoked for four to five hours. (Chicken, ribs and brisket are available together on the sampler plate for \$24.95.)

The kitchen — run by chef Herman Valderrama and overseen by Kessler-Godin — is also working on house-made smoked sausages. And despite his prowess with meat, Kessler-Godin is actually a former vegetarian who sees to it that vegetarians have lots of options among the barbecue. The restaurant even makes its own seitan, and beautiful salads are also available.

The kosher designation means no pork or dairy can be served, only kosher wines can be brought in, and the restaurant is closed Friday nights and all day Saturday in observance of the Jewish Sabbath. But Smokey Joe's really transcends any kind of kosher designation. Whether you're kosher or not — or Jewish or not — this is high-quality food that deserves a wider audience.

The only time I longed for dairy was when the non-dairy sour cream and non-dairy whipped cream made appearances (neither seemed necessary to enjoying their dishes). The meat was of impressive quality. And the absence of such ingredients as butter seemed to result in the restaurant trying harder to produce fresh flavors. You get a luscious sweet onion jam spread with the basket of complimentary cornbread that starts your meal, and mashed potatoes have a distinct but not overwhelming garlic flavor.

The slightly sweet chili (\$13.95) includes both ground beef and chunks of that lovely brisket, and we enjoyed it atop an absolute monster of a half-pound burger with a bun that was quite breadly but did manage to stand up to the chili. Ari's wings (\$8.95 for 12), big and meaty and lightly rolled in cornstarch and coated in a compelling zingy sweet sauce, reminded us of the flavors of Korean fried chicken.

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"The highlight of a gorgeous taco salad was the lush, creamy house-made guacamole."

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Kosher
Restaurant!**