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COLORADO SPRINGS The Gazette

DINING REVIEW: Colorado Smokehouse does barbecue, sides and dessert right

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Barbecue, more than any other American food, is divided by sects, and each sect holds to a specific regional cuisine.

In Texas, it's beef, smoked over oak or mesquite, with very little sauce, usually served on the side. In South Carolina it's pork, smoked over hickory, chopped and served with a wash of vinegar and spice. In Kansas City, Mo., they'll smoke anything — it's all about a sweet, thick tomato and molasses sauce.

But at Fountain's Colorado Smokehouse, you find something different — a man who crosses all barbecue boundaries. Shawn

Richards slow-cooks meats at a closet-size barbecue kitchen with a tiny, six-stool dining room attached. Richards is a Kansas City boy, so it should be all about the sauce, and, to some extent, it is. He has six sauces from which to choose and pours them on thick. But he also grills with hot, slow, powerful mesquite like a Texan, and he smokes his pork with a Southern-style rub, serves it pulled, and offers a thin, fiery Carolina vinegar to serve on top.

"People get all excited about what's barbecue and what's not," he said with a dismissive grin as he sliced hot, Texas-style brisket for me recently. "I just love all barbecue, so I do it all in the style I like best."

He might be onto something. Colorado Smokehouse does just about everything right, from moist, flavorful meats to dependable sides and a dynamite cobbler.

The barbecue here is served as it should be — ordered at the counter and served on disposable plates with lots of napkins. The best place to start is the brisket, dry-rubbed and slow-cooked (\$5 for a sandwich, \$7.50 for a plate). Order a plate and Richards pulls a big hunk of beef out of the heat tray and flops it on the cutting table with a thump. Then he cuts thick chunks off with a big knife. I was almost salivating as they flopped onto the table. He trims away the fat — but don't worry, there is still plenty marbled in the meat — and gives the meat a few rough chops before sliding it onto the Styrofoam container that serves as a plate. It is some fine brisket, if a bit inconsistent. It's well-seasoned and cooked until the gentle bite of the mesquite pervades it like perfume.

Once the meat is on the plate, Richards' K.C. side comes out. He asks what sauce you want and pours it on. For the brisket, he recommends a mix of Sweet BBQ and tangy, spicy Southwest, full of pepper and cumin. Together they make a good sweet and sour blend. But, in general, the sauces are hit and miss.

A plate comes with one side and a drink, and while the sides toe to the traditional line, they never fall into the typical barbecue-joint category of apathetic afterthought mush. The beans here are bright and fresh, made from scratch with the right balance of tang and tomato, and lots of stewed pork. The collard greens are tender but firm, and not too salty or oily. The potato salad is the traditional yellow stuff, but done right — neither too mushy nor too firm. In short, the sides here are actually worth eating — a rare thing. (See Rudy's Country Store, across town, which labors for hours over its beef but relies on a three-bean salad.)

Nothing at Colorado Smokehouse seems to be an afterthought. The pulled pork (\$4.75, \$7) is rich and smoky, with delectable bits of dark brown, slightly leathery outer bits that bear the brunt of the smoker.

The ribs (\$8) are moist and subtle, cooked overnight, but never so coated with black creosote that the essence of the pork is lost. Even pulled chicken — a meat that can easily be too dry or too mealy — is moist, tender and delicious.

Most surprising are the desserts, which Richard makes in house. They change from day to day. You might encounter apple pie cheesecake. But you will always find peach or blackberry cobbler (\$3) — which here are closer to coffeecake than crumble and so delicious that it is worth, somehow, saving room.

Mixing sauces, smoking pork over mesquite or serving cobbler that's closer to cake may not be "real" barbecue, but when you are enjoying yourself, who really cares?

COLORADO SMOKEHOUSE

3 STARS out of 5

(Good barbecue in a mix of styles)

Address: 6679 Camden Blvd., Fountain

Contact: 651-1453, coloradosmokehouse.net

Entrees: \$4-\$16

Hours: 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Mondays-Saturdays, 11 a.m.-6 p.m., Sundays

Vegetarian: Not much

Alcohol: No

Credit cards: Yes

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