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My Last Bite: Ribs, sausage and sides a 10-year hit at Smokehouse

Thursday

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By Brian Leaf

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Specialties: Barbecue pork and chicken; soul food

Location: 432 Harrison Ave. (Harrison Avenue and South Main Street), Rockford

Phone: 815-962-5512

Hours: 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Thursday; 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Friday; noon to 9 p.m. Saturday; noon to 7 p.m. Soul Food Sunday

Prices: Range from \$3.50 for 1/4 chicken sandwich to \$28.50 for a full slab of spare ribs. Side dishes, \$3-\$5

Services: Restaurant seating, carry out, catering

Website: smokehouseauthenticbbq.com

ROCKFORD — Thank you, health department, for shutting down Gail Fort's rogue barbecue stand.

It would have been a grave injustice to let her continue to grill and sell ribs from her backyard near Concord and Preston streets.

For we, the carnivorous public, may never have delighted in the sweet tangy sauce smothered meat served at her restaurant, Smokehouse Authentic Bar-B-Que, 432 Harrison Ave.

The renegade chef is now legit. So is Fort's barbecue, which has been slow cooked on a grill behind the Shell gas station at Harrison and South Main streets for 10 years now.

On a recent visit with my colleagues Greg Stanley and Alex Gary, we found the restaurant clean, the forks and table coverings plastic, the help friendly and attentive and the food delicious.

Prep work and service is done in the restaurant's kitchen, but the meat of the business is done over charcoal in a tin shack behind the restaurant where the truckers park. That's where Gail's brother, Stanley Fort, grills the pork ribs, pork shoulder and chicken before they're painted with a sauce inspired by Fort's kin from southwest Arkansas.

And that's a fine food lineage.

I ordered the four-piece spare rib dinner (\$13.75). It was served with two slices of sauce-mopping white bread and sides of cornbread, baked beans and collard greens. Stanley ordered the 6-inch Polish sausage (\$5.95) with barbecue fries. Gary went for the Sho Boat, a plate of pork shoulder with mac and cheese and garlic bun (\$10.70).

We had coupons, so the total bill was \$31.50.

My ribs were tender, moist and meaty. Fort said before it is cooked, meat is rubbed with a blend of black pepper, paprika, seasoning salt and red pepper "just to give a little wang to it." The sauce is a blend of vinegar, ketchup, brown sugar and jalapeno pepper juice, which gives it a little zip.

I don't care for spicy foods, but my Scandinavian palate took great joy in eating these saucy ribs. The collard greens are also cooked in a sauce blended of jalapeno juice, vinegar and bits of grilled pork. The beans had sliced hot dogs and grilled pork bits, reminding me of "gourmet" meals I prepared in college. The cornbread was a bit dry and unexceptional.

In ads, the Smokehouse says "No Whimpy Polish Sausages Here," and Stanley agreed. The sausage was split, then deep fried, giving it a crispy burnt edge. It was topped with relish, jalapenos and onions, and served with fries garnished with barbecue sauce.

"It's not pansy at all," Stanley said.

Gary said his pork tips were sweet and tasty, but it was the mac and cheese that caught his attention. A penny pincher, he's eaten plenty of it over the years.

"It was much better than what we make at home, much creamier," he said.

Adding cream cheese to the sauce is the secret behind its creaminess, Fort said. It's among the many tricks she's learned during a restaurant career that started by accident.

That accident happened in a local factory. Fort lost a finger on her right hand. Then she lost her job. Money was tight. So she started cooking ribs on weekends.

"It was helping us pay the bills," she said.

At first, it was mostly black neighbors who came to eat. When Hispanic and white people started coming to the neighborhood for her weekend barbecue, she figured she was on to something.

When the health department showed up, she knew she was busted.

"I said, 'you guys want some free food?'"

After they shut her down, she got a food truck. She parked it at Morgan and South Main streets.

For 11 days she did enough business to cause traffic snarls. The city called, she said, and told her she couldn't park there any more.

When she was getting gas at the Shell station, she saw space on the west side of the building was vacant and for lease. She peeped in the window and saw a commercial restaurant hood.

She knew it was perfect for a barbecue joint, but she didn't have any money.

So she worked out a deal with the station owner. If he'd allow her to park the truck in his lot and sell barbecue for two months, she could raise enough money to lease space in the building and open a restaurant.

And a decade ago she opened the Smokehouse.

The restaurant has limited hours and is open only four days a week, Thursday through Sunday.

The Smokehouse, which also caters, has a soul food Sunday special that includes meat, side dishes including yams, black eyed peas and dressing, and desserts made from scratch that may include sweet potato pie, peach cobbler, banana pudding or chocolate cake.

It's not a fancy restaurant so if you go there, dress comfortably. Wear loose fitting pants and a top that can take a smear of barbecue sauce without causing worry because it can get messy, which is perhaps a metaphor for running a restaurant.

Fort said it's been a struggle and she made plenty of mistakes starting up, some of which she's still paying for. But now she says she's got a great accountant, a solid business model and a loyal clientele.

"It's my regular customers who come in and keep me going," said Fort. "Some people come four days in a row."

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