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Barbecue Buccaneers

The guys behind La Belle Vie and Solera bring you pirate food.

BY DARA MOSKOWITZ GRUMDAHL



PHOTO BY TERRY BRENNAN

Everywhere I've gone this summer, I've heard one message traveling through the state, in the style of the classic game of telephone: Tim McKee, the five-star chef behind La Belle Vie and Solera is opening a barbecue restaurant in Stillwater—pass it on! Five-star barbecue—pass it on! La Belle Vie for cheap—pass it on!

Well, not really. Yes, Smalley's Caribbean Barbecue is indeed a barbecue restaurant in Stillwater led by the illustrious Tim McKee and his business partner, Josh Thoma. But the food at Smalley's bears little resemblance to the precise, exquisitely focused creations of La Belle Vie. No, the food at Smalley's is chicken wings and pork ribs, served on paper in plastic baskets, best paired with cold beer.

Yup, I said chicken wings and pork ribs in plastic baskets. And smoked beef brisket, pork shoulder, pulled pork sandwiches, and burgers. Doesn't sound like a Tim McKee restaurant, does it? It doesn't taste like one either. It mostly tastes like barbecue, albeit not the usual barbecue we run into around here, but Jamaican barbecue.

What's Jamaican barbecue? It's Tim McKee's favorite kind of barbecue. It's barbecue he loves so much that he convinced folks running a rib shack on a beach in Jamaica to teach him their secrets. It's made by treating meat with an allspice-heavy marinade, then grilling it over hardwood oak logs that have been embellished with lots of pimento wood chips—pimento trees being where allspice berries come from—for true pimento wood smoke. So, Jamaican barbecue has a lot of allspice going on: There's the allspice marinade, the allspice smoke, and, naturally, the allspice in the barbecue sauce. It's unlike any barbecue I've ever had before.

I liked the chicken at Smalley's the best. It's a very interesting, very different, very complex sort of chicken, and the pimento wood gives it a profoundly herbal profile, with tastes of oregano, rosemary, eucalyptus, nettles, and lime peel. The pork shoulder and ribs are excellent too, but very different than the chicken. In the pork, the smoke and marinade seem to pull out a sweet, ham-like quality in the meat, a sweetness accented by the many peppery and herbal notes imparted by the pimento wood. In typical barbecue restaurant fashion, the

food here is available in all sorts of platters pairing one or more meats with side dishes, most of which derive from the classic Southern meat-and-three tradition. For instance, there's a good, simple, creamy mac-and-cheese; pork and beans; roasted sweet potatoes with sausage; and a few more obviously Caribbean dishes, like curried vegetables. However, even though I tasted just about every side Smalley's offered, I never found one about which I thought: *This is spectacular. I have to have more of this. I have to have the recipe.* Everything just struck me as: *pretty good.*

A few things didn't even hit pretty good. I thought the beef brisket was peculiar. Ordered without barbecue sauce, the meat was dry and tough. Ordered with sauce, its flavor became lost, making the whole thing taste like some odd sauerbraten reduction. Similarly, the barbecued shrimp, grilled prettily on sugar-cane skewers, lost all shrimp taste amid the smoke and sauce; the shrimp may as well have been plantains or tofu. The appetizers were the biggest disappointment. The crab cakes tasted like coconut and breading, and the fried green tomatoes and corn fritters were nearly indistinguishable, each being sort of flavorless. Desserts, like a lively Key-lime pie and a coconut flan with rum caramel, were rock-solid, but the only items I tasted at Smalley's that I thought were worth a trip to Stillwater were the drinks.

Yes, the drinks. In addition to 40-odd rums, including single-estate rarities from Trinidad, Haiti, and St. Croix, Smalley's offers a number of playful, flavorful cocktails. All were devised by La Belle Vie's bar manager Johnny Michaels who really outdid himself with drinks like the fantastic Kingston, in which a house-made grapefruit syrup and a sour-cherry *eau de vie* pluck out the sweet and spicy notes of a (what else?) allspice-infused rum. Each sip was refreshing, brisk, spicy, and lovely. Michaels tells me the Kingston is his update on a classic cocktail called the Hemingway daiquiri; he also tells me I missed the best drink at Smalley's: the Kill Devil shot. "In Barbados, they used to call the rum 'kill devil' because it was so harsh," Michaels says. "So I thought, let's bring back the old-time macho-man pirate liquor." To make his Kill Devil, he takes a variety of rums, including 151-proof Bacardi, combines them with some top-secret flavoring agents and syrups and decants the whole mixture into old port bottles (to which he has affixed special pirate Kill Devil labels). One of the reasons I didn't try the Kill Devil shot is that it wasn't on the menu. It's basically a top-secret pirate drink, for pirates in the know.

Pirates?

Oh, yes. Now, the Smalley's folks are happy to tell you that Smalley's is a pirate bar from the moment you walk in the door, but I assumed this was just a toss-off gimmick. It isn't. There is, in fact, a resident pirate at Smalley's, and his name is Shawn Smalley. In addition to being the chef de cuisine and namesake of Smalley's, Smalley himself is a proud Stillwater townie (Stillwater High School Class of '95) and pirate. "I walked out into the bar the other night, and this guy was like, 'I heard you looked like a pirate, but seriously, you look like a pirate,'" Smalley says. "I do. I've got the long hair, beard, tattoos, the whole deal. I had a pirate wedding: Everyone was dressed to the hilt, there were swords everywhere. And instead of, you know, a unity candle, we had a 'mixing of the rum' ceremony." And your wife, I asked, was she dressed as a pirate? "No, she was more princessy. But white and purple, because we're big Vikings fans."

Smalley's got its start, Shawn told me, "Because this is how we cooks treat ourselves. When I was at La Belle Vie every Friday or Saturday, I'd make chicken wings for the staff. I like to make them really hot because everyone's really hungry at the end of the night and they got tortured trying to eat them. I get some sick pleasure out of that." And in the future? Smalley's will be "the ultimate pirate hang-out bar," Smalley says. "It's pretty damn awesome the way it is, but we have five coconut heads hanging down off the ceiling in the bar right now, and I want to have 500."

Which is how I came to understand how Smalley's is truly a Tim McKee restaurant. Because one of the lesser-known aspects of being a five-star chef is having the ability to keep, retain, inspire, lead, and, generally, enjoy a whole lot of 20-something cooks—the people who actually make the five-star food. Or rather, your ability to head a band of pirates. "It's a pretty ragtag crew back there," admits McKee. "But really, this is exactly how I cook when I'm just having a good time. My favorite thing in the summer is to go out on the river, get up on an island, make a campfire, bring a makeshift grill, prop it up, and cook. And that's what we're doing here. It's just no pretensions, good cooking."

No pretensions, good cooking by pirates, for pirates. And for the people who like to eat like pirates. Pass it on.

Dara Moskowitz Grumdahl is a senior editor at Minnesota Monthly.

Smalley's Caribbean Barbeque and Pirate Bar

423 Main St., Stillwater

651-439-5375

Dinner hours are 5 to 10 Monday through Saturday. Sunday closed at 9.

Happy hour 4 to 5:30 Monday through Friday and 10:30 to midnight every day.

Lunch 11:30 to 2:30 Saturday and Sunday.

Bar closes Sunday through Thursday at 1 and Friday and Saturday at 2.