

BY JOHN T. EDGE

Playing with Fire

TWO OF AUSTIN'S BIGGEST CULINARY NAMES PUT A SINGULAR SPIN ON TEXAS BARBECUE



In the past decade, food obsessives have gone looking for Southern pits where masters still hew to old ways. Helen Turner, queen of the shoulder and slaw sandwich, who cleaves pork to order in Brownsville, Tennessee, has gotten her long-deserved due. So has Tootsie Tomanetz, who tends overnight fires at Snow's BBQ in Lexington, Texas, and serves brisket and sausage to Saturday morning pilgrims.

That was then. And that was important. Loro, a new Austin restaurant, is now. The legend on the side of the concrete block building, south of downtown, reads, Asian Smokehouse & Bar. That's a limiting description for a restaurant that borrows from the barbecue rites of Texas and the street food rituals of Southeast Asia to forge something singular and delicious here in the homeland of chips and queso and enchilada plates.

The look is rafter-beamed Texas dance hall-icehouse-barbecue shed, filtered through a Danish mod design sensibility. Terra-cotta globes dangle over trestle tables. Vines spill from planters mounted above leather-seated booths. Woven chairs swing on a live-oak-shaded gravel patio that wraps the building.

Customers order from a pegboard tacked behind the bar. Decorated with thrift-shop finds, accented by wide-screen televisions and churning frozen drink machines, and stacked with chef cookbooks published by friends of the owners (more on the owners in a minute), that bar runs the length of the room.

At Loro, chips and dip translates as deep-fried wonton skins, dusted with a Japanese red pepper flake mixture called togarashi. Served with bowls of Thai green sauce and peanut sambal, they arrive on those butcher-paper-lined rectangular trays, now elemental to the central Texas barbecue aesthetic. Kettle corn, tossed with shreds of brisket detritus and served in a stumpy paper bag, recalls Poppycock on a bender.

A happy-hour burger, pink at the center and capped with red onion-brisket jam, tastes of smoke from first bite to last. A brisket sandwich comes mounded with chopped beef, brightened by chile aioli, and garnished with Thai herbs.

Southern culture has never been static. Listen to the album *Young Sick Camellia* by St. Paul & the Broken Bones, or view Kara Walker's cut-paper silhouette meditations on domestic service, and you recognize

From left: Tyson Cole and Aaron Franklin; Loro's shaded patio; wonton chips and dips and smoked meats with an Asian twist.

Barbecue Marriage

An Atlanta couple's pioneering union

Since 2010, Jiyeon Lee, a South Korea native, and her husband, Cody Taylor, born in Texas and raised in Tennessee, have merged the flavors of their childhoods to make an argument for the newest of New Souths. At Heirloom Market BBQ, on the Atlanta perimeter, pork shoulder gets a rub of Korean chile paste before it hits the smoker, green tomatoes receive the kimchi treatment, and collards get a stir of miso.—J.T.E.

that dynamic Southern expression forever chafes against old ideas about what this place was and reflects what this place might become.

Much the same is true of barbecue, our food with the biggest fan base and strongest defenders. Some of what we regard as age-old is relatively new. From Alabama chicken with white sauce to Memphis dry-rub ribs, many of the beloved dishes of today were conceived in the previous century by pit masters unafraid to buck convention and tradition.

That insurgency continues. Today the South's best chefs do two things at once: They mine the past to revive old ingredients and techniques, and embrace the future promised by a new generation of restaurateurs with roots in Saigon and Veracruz and thousands of ports between.

Use the word *chef* purposefully, because Loro is a project of two Austin chefs, working in tandem. They made their names in fields bound by tradition. Both have won acclaim. Tyson Cole earned a James Beard Best Chef: Southwest award in 2011 for

his work at Uchi, arguably the best sushi restaurant in the region. The other, Aaron Franklin, the man behind the fabled brisket (and the infamous lines) at crosstown Franklin Barbecue, won his Beard four years later, becoming the first pit master to gain recognition as a chef.

Often portrayed as traditionalists, neither fits that moniker. Before he opened Uchi in 2003, Cole, a Florida native, put in years of apprenticeship and learned to speak Japanese. But he never claimed the traditionalist mantle, preferring instead to serve tuna sashimi with goat cheese and apples.

Franklin grew up in Bryan, Texas, where his parents owned a barbecue restaurant. In the run-up to opening Franklin in 2009, he traveled to old-guard joints across the state, eating brisket and taking notes. But he also took liberties, goosing his sauce with espresso, because he noticed, during long caffeine-fueled nights by the pit, that smoke and fatty beef and coffee marry well.

Think of this pairing as a buddy movie, in which Franklin plays the Bob Hope role,

Cole subs for Bing Crosby, and the upstart with the best shot at the girl is pit master Bramwell Tripp, who works two Oyster roisserie smokers, fueled by post oak. The goods that come off his pits and out of the adjacent kitchen honor and subvert the barbecue genre.

Start with the salmon, which comes out of the smoke auburn and jiggly and arrives partially submerged in a bowl of tart cucumber-yuzu broth. Detour for the garlic rice noodles, studded with bites of pineapple and currants and cashews, drenched in a sharp fish sauce. End with the best dish in the house, a smoked and grilled prime bavette of beef, sliced into medium-rare tiles and topped with shishito salsa verde.

Service, often an afterthought at traditional barbecue joints, sings here. Ask bartender Chris Rogers what to drink, and he will share samples of two cocktails and let you choose. (Get the ginger old-fashioned.) For dessert, he might slide over a glassine pouch with a salted chocolate chip toffee cookie inside, like a blackjack dealer hitting your ten with an ace. 