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OffBeat Magazine (April 2008)
Review: Whole Hog Café



Whole Hog Cafe

Can you find great gumbo outside this state? I imagine that many Louisiana exiles have located passable gumbo elsewhere. When they long for home, they can order a foreign-born bowl that makes them happy if not fully satisfied.

I grew up in the barbecue belt, and that's how I feel about smoked beef, ribs and chicken around here. I can find barbecue when I need it, but I don't crave any local offering. When I heard that Whole Hog Café, an outpost of a well-known Arkansas restaurant, had set up in the CBD, I hoped that a true pit master had arrived.

Whole Hog might be the only barbecue joint with two escalators in the dining room. Located in the lobby of the Entergy building, Whole Hog hides its Ole Hickory smoker in the alley between the office tower and its parking garage. A two-story chimney sends the smell of smoked meat wafting into the city's concrete quarter.

If only more of that smoke clung to the meat. The pulled chicken had the most smoke, and this moist meat is the best choice here. No surprise, since chicken is one of the primary industries of Arkansas.

The chopped beef, on the other hand, almost had the texture of ground meat. If that beef ever had a smoke ring, the evidence had been shredded. It tasted vaguely like boudin sausage with a beefy flavor that made me wonder if liver was in the mix. The pork was the most disappointing. The two times that I tried it, the pork was shredded into dry shards. Only a liberal dousing of one of the six sauces made it edible. The baby back ribs were better, but they were wrapped in a thick molasses glaze. The fondness for sweetness evident in the glaze and sauces affects the sides of baked beans and coleslaw. The best bet was the mayo-based potato salad with thick slices of potato.

Whole Hog hasn't upped the ante for barbecue in New Orleans. It's decent, and I'd eat there often if I worked at the Entergy building. But I doubt I'll make it to Whole Hog again. On the drive downtown, I'd certainly pass more enticing local options—probably even a few good spots for a bowl of gumbo.
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—Todd A. Price