

BBQ&A: Sam Suchoff, Chef-Owner of The Pig

Posted at BBQJew.com on February 23, 2011 by Porky LeSwine

Sam Suchoff is not your typical pit boss. But then [The Pig](#) is not your typical barbecue joint. Indeed, Suchoff has a damn near disturbing range of culinary experience for a barbecue cook. More to the point, much of the fare he serves at The Pig veers away from North Carolina barbecue tradition with menu items like brisket, tamales, kielbasa and, yes, even country fried tofu.

Veering away from tradition is not necessarily a bad thing because many traditional North Carolina barbecue joints offer little on their menus worth sampling beyond the holy trinity of barbecue, slaw and hushpuppies (which, to be fair, is not necessarily a bad thing either). Suchoff offers a wide-ranging, pork-centric menu, but he respects the tradition of whole hog barbecue and that reverence is evident along with his creativity.

In a recent interview, Suchoff was kind enough to share with me the reasons he cooks with an electric smoker, why barbecue is the dish he's most proud of cooking despite all the variety on his menu, and why vegetarianism is an easy way to get girls (at least in L.A.).

BBQJew: I've heard through the grapevine that you are a recovering vegetarian. I am sorry to hear that you went through such a difficult phase and my heart goes out to you and your family. Still, I am happy to see that you have conquered your disease. I assume that opening a barbecue restaurant is the final step in a 12-step vegetarianism recovery program. Seriously, tell me how a former veg-head decides to open a restaurant called The Pig?

Sam Suchoff: I became a vegetarian when I was 13. At the time I was living in Los Angeles and the whole concept of where food came from was pretty foreign to me. The decision to quit the meat was



more a way to impress the cool girls than a political/ethical statement. It was a choice that stuck. As I grew up and became more aware of how the majority of our meat is produced I became more staunch in my vegetarianism and when I was 19 gave up dairy and eggs to become a vegan. When I got out of college and realized that a cubicle wasn't for me I took a job in a kitchen. By this time I had started eating fish and a little dairy. When I started cooking professionally I knew that I had to know what the food I was making tasted like, so I plunged face first into meat. [Editor's

note: The inset picture proves Suchoff is not lying.] I still hold many of the same beliefs that led me to become a vegan. What is different is that I can now take an active role supporting ethical farming practices as opposed to taking a passive stance in the face of industrial food production, opting out of meat cart blanche.

BBQJew: Tell me a little about your philosophy in terms of sourcing sustainably raised, local hogs. Does that philosophy extend to other ingredients too?

SS: I buy all my pork directly from local farmers who raise their hogs outdoors on pasture without the use of antibiotics or hormones. These hogs are more like the hogs used in the early days of North Carolina barbecue and I think that the lean-to-fat ratio of these hogs gives you a pig that you can cook all day long without drying it out.

By buying live animals and getting them the day they leave the slaughterhouse, I know that my pork is as fresh as possible. My pork is about as fresh it comes and that adds to the flavor of my BBQ. Although my brisket is not locally produced, it is antibiotic and hormone-free. I buy my collards and sweet potatoes from Stanley Hughes at Pine Knot Farm who has been practicing organic farming for many years and who you can go see on Saturdays at the Carrboro Farmers Market.

BBQJew: Ethical issues aside, what made you decide the time was right to open up The Pig, especially given the tough economy and recent closing of The Barbecue Joint in the same location?



SS: Firstly, The Barbecue Joint had a great following and loyal clientele who appreciated the unpretentious and delicious food put out by Damon Lapas. It was not lack of business that shut down the Joint, but an attempt to move to a larger location that fell through and left them responsible for two leases; their Weaver Dairy Road location that they never left, and the large space on Elliott Road that they were never able to up-fit and move into. They inevitably fell behind on payments for the new lease and when their debt had reached a certain point the new landlord took legal actions and ceased all assets belonging to The Barbecue Joint.

After speaking with Damon and getting his approval, I began the process of acquiring what was formerly The Barbecue Joint and transforming it into The Pig. It was an opportunity that more or less fell in my lap, not an issue of timing. The location, though not located in the center of town, works because it is surrounded by large neighborhoods and is right between 15-501 and I-40 and parking is never an issue. Plus the kitchen was already set up and people associated the location with good barbecue.

BBQJew: What did you do before opening your restaurant? What training, experiences or cuisines are your main influences?

SS: I worked in various local restaurants including Lantern, Neal's Deli and The Barbecue Joint. My last job involved product development for a company interested in sourcing and distributing local meat to restaurants, specialty grocery stores and local meat markets. My time at Lantern gave me an appreciation and awareness of local foods. Neal's Deli showed me the value of keeping things simple and delicious. My passion for meat cookery was encouraged and nourished by Damon at The Barbecue Joint.

BBQJew: Why The Pig instead of The Cow or The Chicken? Is there something about the pig that lends itself particularly well to creating an interesting menu?

SS: Really? C'mon Porky, stop joking around.

BBQJew: Okay, I'll get serious now. Do you consider The Pig a barbecue joint in the traditional sense or is it something else?

SS: The Pig is not a traditional barbecue joint, but we are preparing traditional North Carolina food. I like to think of The Pig as more of a mix between a neighborhood diner and a barbecue joint with a focus on local products and local tastes.

BBQJew: In my opinion, your preparation of the North Carolina barbecue "holy trinity" of chopped pork, slaw and hushpuppies is different than anywhere else I've eaten. The pork barbecue and its sauce sticks pretty near the Eastern NC whole hog tradition, but the slaw and hushpuppies feature different flavors and textures than I'm accustomed to. Are you willing to say what ingredients set those dishes apart from what you might find at another joint?

SS: Well, our slaw is orange, and this is one of the first things customers notice as they are served a tray of barbecue. Many people are used to carrots shredded up with the cabbage in their slaw, but when it comes to a minced slaw like we do at The Pig, carrots aren't usually part of the mix. We grind up carrots in our coleslaw dressing to incorporate their sweetness and earthiness without serving a mouthful of minced carrot nibs. Other than the carrots, ours is a standard mayo-based slaw.

With hushpuppies some people look for a crispy, salty nugget to add some crunch to their barbecue tray, others look for a soft and fluffy pup to soak up the porky goodness pooling in one corner of their plate. With our hushpuppies we try to serve up the best of both worlds in one bite. They have a medium thick shell of crunchy fried goodness surrounding a fluffy center. They aren't sweet and they aren't particularly oniony; they are meant to complement the pork and slaw that we serve them with, or the brisket with red sauce, or the catfish with remoulade sauce...



BBQJew: As I understand it, you've chosen to cook with an electric cooker that uses wood chips to provide the smoke. There are some folks who consider pork cooked over anything other than wood coals to be, well, something other than barbecue no matter how good it tastes. What do you say to those stubborn but traditionally minded folks, myself included?

SS: This is a tough question and the answer is a lot more complicated than I am capable of putting down in print, but here's my attempt.

It is easy to forget that eating a meal is more than a matter of taste. It involves memories and expectations all based on personal knowledge and history. Cooking whole hogs over smoldering wood coals allows diners to place themselves within an historical narrative that intermingles flavors, memories and histories both real and imagined of pastoral North Carolina, backwoods family gatherings and indulgence in leaner times. This sounds a bit like b.s., even to me, but that is due to my own inability to communicate what happens when we sit down and give ourselves over to a mouthwatering plate of traditionally prepared foods. There is something more to eating a meal that anyone reading a food blog dedicated to barbecue must admit. [Editor's note: Don't worry, nobody is reading this except me.] My electric smoker serves as a barrier to such romantic wanderings. It is an anchor into the everyday. It can be ignored, it can even be appreciated for its consistent and tasty results, but it can't serve the same imaginative function as the traditional pits at Allen and Son's or The Skylight Inn. This is a lack that I am willing to admit. Taste-wise, I believe the difference is insignificant, if not null.

BBQJew: What dishes on The Pig's menu are you most proud of and why?

SS: The barbecue. No question. It's a pride in the farmers we choose to work with, the simple goodness of pork, and our own restraint in letting pork, smoke, heat and a simple little sauce do all the talking.

BBQJew: Switching gears a bit: Where did you grow up and what are your earliest food-related memories? When did you first taste NC barbecue and what did you think of it?

SS: I grew up in Los Angeles, California. My earliest food memories are of baking with my mother and the smells of my father at the wok. In all honesty, my first bite of NC barbecue was underwhelming. I had great expectations but found it a bit plain. Other regional "barbecues" hits you over the head with a tangy sauce that I had come to expect from anything "barbecue". What I had was a plate of pork. It is only over time that I was able to appreciate the simple and pure pleasures of North Carolina pork barbecue. I now hold this simple pile of pork as the truest form of barbecue, bar none.



BBQJew: Okay, one final question so pull out your grease-stained crystal ball and look into the future. It's 2021 and The Pig is still going strong: what do you hope the restaurant has become and what new dishes are you serving?

SS: In 2021, I'd like to see The Pig in the same location, serving the same neighborhood folk the same quality food. The expansion of a restaurant that depends so heavily on local farmers is limited by the pace at which those farmers can increase their own production, and that growth rate for natural hog farming is slow and tenuous. The Pig will grow with the NC Natural Hog Growers Association; slowly but steadily and with mutual support. When that growth happens I'd like to see a line of products including BBQ, Bologna, Hot Dogs, Bacon... produced under The Pig brand and available for wholesale and retail. For the time being we'll work on expanding our catering and keeping the food as delicious and consistent as possible.

BBQJew: That's a good vision, thanks for your time and best of luck.