

Holy Smokes!

There's never been a better time to eat barbecue

TEXT BY JULIAN AJELLO IMAGES BY NGOC TRAN

WHENEVER I HEAR someone remark that America has no real cuisine, I simply reply, "American barbecue." Rooted in the South, barbecue applies heat indirectly by smoking. Wrapped in foil, various cuts of meat that would otherwise tend to be tough spend hours in a smoker where they are infused with the taste and smell of a variety of woods. Not to be confused with grilling meat, where the goal is to get the meat on the table as fast as possible by applying heat directly, an American barbecue's mission is to cook the meat slowly and with a low even temperature.

Those longing for, or longing to try, American barbecue must make a trip to **Quan Ut Ut** (168 Vo Van Kiet, D1). It's the project and passion of three partners - Tim, Mark and Albin. Tim and Albin, an Aussie and a Frenchman, have lived in Vietnam for a number of years and are no

strangers to the hospitality industry. After visiting Mark in his native Chicago and sampling his culinary skills, they decided to open a BBQ joint back in Saigon.

Wooden picnic tables, a grill, and a smoker box greet you with those first whiffs of smoky goodness when you arrive. Starters and sides like macaroni and cheese (VND45,000) are a welcome sight, but accounting for Vietnamese tastes means the amount of cheese is a light coating rather than a complete drenching. The crispy fried chicken skins (VND45,000) are best described as sinful. Served with ranch dressing, there is no mistaking these are about anything other than taste. They also make delicious cornbread (VND35,000) with yellow capsicum, served with honey butter on the side. One starter that stood out — and was a unanimous recommendation by the

owners — was the home-brined bacon (VND80,000). "When we tasted the batch made with the brine we came up with, we felt like kids on Christmas morning," gushes Mark. **Quan Ut Ut** also sells bacon to customers who wish to keep some at home - and you will.

However, these things merely set the table, so to speak. **Quan Ut Ut's** treasure is its ability to smoke meat. The pork shoulder (VND200,000), bacon, and ribs (VND300,000) are smoked using cashew shells. "We could have imported hickory or other woods typically used to smoke meat, but that would be very expensive," explains Tim. "We tried a variety of options including cacao, coffee, eucalyptus, longan, and rubber tree woods, but none of them were very good. When we tried the cashew shells we knew we had a winner."



Barbecue sampler



Cornbread



Crispy fried chicken skins



“When we tasted the batch made with the brine we came up with, we felt like kids on Christmas morning”

Chicken (VND175,000) and pork belly (VND200,000) are smoked using sugar cane husks, giving them a sweet taste that is a wonderful departure from conventional wood flavors. They also offer sausages (VND250,000) that are prepared in casings that provide the wonderful snap proper casings should without detracting from the taste. The pork and chicken are sourced locally, while the beef used in their burgers (and rumor has it brisket is coming soon) is imported from the US.

Condiments are a big deal, and perhaps an even bigger secret than the meats themselves, when it comes to barbecue. Rather than single out a particular one they’ve opted to cover the gamut to satisfy any palate: Smokin’ Honey Bunny (a spicy honey-based sauce), Carolina Gold (a vinegar-based mustard favorite), Spicy Firecracker (a chili barbecue sauce to appeal to local tastes) and Sticky Fingers (a version of Kansas City’s tangy variety that will satisfy even the staunchest barbecue aficionados).

Our best advice is to try a little of everything. The barbecue sampler (VND550,000) includes pork shoulder, rib tips, chicken and sausage and comes with okra and corn on the cob. Be sure to generously dip into all the different sauces to find your personal favorite.

The last detail they’ve included, and which is as impressive as it is appreciated, is the sweetened iced tea. Any barbecue meal in the US served without sweetened iced tea is very close to blasphemy. Quan Ut Ut brews its own and enjoys switching up the flavors that include peach and raspberry. Refills are free. If you’re not a tea lover, they also brew their own beer in addition to serving several imports and domestics. And Albin is making sure those of us who love bourbon will have a fine selection to choose from; of course, you won’t get free refills on those!

I dare you to save enough room to try their dessert menu. I didn’t make it that far. But what I can tell you is that whether you make it to the dessert menu or not, you best wear your eatin’ pants. ■



Taxi Dancers

Not in the mood to go out dancing with your lady?
Then hire these men to do it for you...

TEXT BY **JULIAN AJELLO** IMAGES BY **QUINN RYAN MATTINGLY**

SON, A STRAPPING 29-year-old man, has been a dancer for three years. He started working in a dance hall as a waiter serving drinks while he was in school, but figured out that the dancers were the ones earning more money. He soon learned some steps, quit university and went to work as a dancer. He wouldn't disclose how much he earns, but offered, "It's much better money than I would be making if I finished my degree and got a normal job. I love dancing and I'm out in these clubs 7 nights a week and I never dance for free."

Son is what you would call a "taxi dancer."

The term and profession first appeared in 1913. Support for Prohibition was gaining

and cities all over America were shuttering bordellos and red light districts. To serve the demand for nightlife, San Francisco's Barbary Coast neighborhood opened up a type of dance hall that came to be called a Barbary Coast dance hall, staffed by women who made a commission from every drink they encouraged male customers to buy. But when Prohibition became law, the halls began charging the men to dance with the women. The more time a customer spent dancing with a woman, the more he paid, like a taxicab, hence the name, taxi dancer. They reached their zenith in the 1920s and 1930s before starting to fall out of fashion at the end of World War II.

However, a large, older female Vietnamese population that desires a steady supply of dance partners, and men who view dancing as a way to make money and have fun at the same time, are keeping Son and his profession alive and kicking in Vietnam.

According to Giang, who manages several similar dance halls in Ho Chi Minh City, there are two clubs in town that offer female taxi dancers, but the rest offer male dancers for female clientele. The majority of them are located in Districts 1 and 3, numbering 15 in total.

Girls Just Wanna Have Fun

On a recent visit to Café Phi Truong in Go Vap



District, the crowd is almost entirely comprised of people over the age of thirty. Phat, a taxi dancer who is 53, has been frequenting these halls since he was a young man.

“Back then I was a customer and I used to go and dance with the girls in the clubs,” he explains. “But after the war things changed and the clubs were forced to go underground. They became mainstream again about 15 years ago.”

Ngoc and Dung, two friends in their 30s, have similar motivations. Ngoc, who was introduced to the scene by Dung, has been going to these clubs for two years. She goes to see her friends and enjoys dancing for exercise as well as socializing. She also hopes to find a boyfriend in the process.

“After I got divorced I decided to start going out again and I found Café Phi Truong,” says Dung, a veteran clubber. “I got to socialize, exercise, and after being (divorced) I got to look for a new boyfriend.” She goes dancing every night of the week and almost always goes here.

“Occasionally I’ll go to a different club when this one is hosting a birthday party or other event that I’m not interested in attending. Otherwise, this is my club. And I always dance with the same two dancers, or I don’t dance.” Dung adds that she even

supports the dancers and has them living under her roof.

Footloose and Fancy Fees

Protocol is straightforward at these clubs. Café Phi Truong’s customers pay VND40,000 for entry, VND45,000 on weekends and

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holidays. Hiring dancers costs VND200,000 for 3 dances. After the initial 3 dances, customers may buy single dances for VND50,000. Additionally, dancers are paid VND1 million per month to show up 5 nights a week. The average dancer earns VND10 million a month. Good dancers can earn much more.

The love life of a dancer is often as

unconventional as the job. “Many dancers have girlfriends,” explains Son. “But they often get jealous because we always have lots of women competing for our time.” He keeps it simple by staying single, and mixing business with pleasure.

Rivalries form between dancers as well as customers, according to Giang. “Often times the jealousy is so intense it erupts into violence when a dancer favors one woman over another, or a wealthy customer spends her time, and money, on a particular dancer. Several years ago the café had one of its dancers stabbed to death by another dancer who was shunned by a wealthy patron.”

Other stories from Giang include housewives who sneak off to clubs that operate both day and night. Under the guise of going shopping they would head to a club, change into a dress hidden in their bags, do their hair and makeup in the bathroom then dance for an hour or two. And right before it’s time to head home, they rush to the market to fill up some grocery bags. In some instances, the women go shopping prior to going to her club and pay one of the cleaning women there to watch their groceries while they dance. She also sees many women playing hooky from work or simply sneaking around behind their husbands’ backs. ■