

Southern cooking comes to the mountains



It would be hard to imagine anyone leaving X Crows hungry. Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

There was a time when hotel restaurants were just a convenience for travelers; no one living in that town would ever step foot inside of it. X Crows is proving that things have changed – and in an extremely tasty way.

This restaurant inside Hotel Becket in South Lake Tahoe is a destination unto itself. The X = 10.

Executive Chef Trent Bissell hails from Alabama, which is perfect for this restaurant that boasts of all things Southern.

Using a massive pellet smoker, Bissell is able to slow cook the various meats – even vegetables – to get that flavor like no other method does. The brisket and pork butt are smoked overnight; the other meats need less time and are cooked fresh each day.



Executive Chef Trent Bissell at the smoker. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Up to 500 pounds of meat can be cooked at once. So far, no bears have come to investigate the outside smoker, which has been named Arlene.

Bissell calls that smoky aroma “Southern cologne.” Pork, including ribs and his own sausage recipe, are what he specializes in.

Starting with the black eye pea hummus (\$8) we knew this wasn’t going to be a typical Tahoe meal. Often hummus has a bland, almost chalky taste. No so with this one. The benne seed crackers were a nice accompaniment; and there were plenty

of them.

The smoked portabella (\$13) was hefty. Even cutting it in half I had a hard time getting my mouth around it, but once I did the flavor was outrageously good. While this is the only vegetarian entrée on the menu, Bissell said he has ideas for more.

Like most barbecue joints, sides are a big part of the offerings. They range from smoky greens (which Sue raved about) to house cut fries (some of the best I've had) to stone ground cheddar grits. Specials are also common, with Sue loving the fresh squash mix.

And some of those sides would make for a good vegetarian meal.



Cocktails are refreshing and the hummus outstanding. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Sue opted to have the fried catfish (\$18) mostly because it's not something you see on a Tahoe menu. She wasn't

disappointed.

It was served with a super-hot sauce that even I couldn't handle. It also came with Bissell's Alabama white sauce, which is more like an aioli. Because it is mayonnaise based it is not on the table with the other sauces. This white sauce was terrific with the fish, portabella and fries.

To pay homage to the mountain that is across the street the menu includes the Heavenly happy meal (\$17) – chopped pork or chopped chicken sandwich, with fries, a shot of Jameson and a PBR.

Take-outs are encouraged, with sides being available by the pint and quart. Entrees are priced a little less for those taking it to go.

Desserts, as the chef says, are meant for two. The banana pudding (\$7) could serve four. Two days before I had had my friend Sharla's banana pudding, and she's from Kentucky, so I knew what good banana pudding tasted like. She might want to go to X Crows and save herself the trouble of making it.

Whiskey is the dominate drink of choice here, with more than 60 to choose from.

"Whiskey and barbecue are best friends. A lot of bourbons have a smokiness," Bissell told *Lake Tahoe News*.

If straight whiskey isn't your thing, I recommend the Southern Sazerac (\$10) – Bulleit rye, absinthe wash, burnt orange peel and Peychaud bitters.

Beer is the other dominate drink choice, with about 30 bottles and six on tap. Wine and other specialty cocktails are also available.

One of the most memorable things about dinner at X Crows was the service. It was off the charts good. Meesh is more than just a server.

She moved to Tahoe from Pennsylvania last year. She quickly learned about the Tahoe Food Hub in Truckee and now X Crows is sourcing some of its food from there. Meesh is also teaching the chef how to grow herbs and vegetables.

“I have a farming background. I love food,” she told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Her love of food is evident in how she describes the various dishes, gets excited about all the vinegar-based homemade barbecue sauces and helps diners choose what to order.

What she brings to the table is a level of service that is hard to find in the basin. She was as refreshing as the restaurant itself.



The plan is to eventually sell the homemade sauces. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Notes:

- X Crows is open for breakfast, lunch and dinner.
- Hours are 7am-9pm Sunday-Wednesday; closing at 11pm on Friday and Saturday.
- Tables are inside and outside. The bar seats 10.
- Dogs are welcome.
- The only negative is how loud the music is across the street at Heavenly Village.