

Bay area's barbecue masters offer their tips

By Sharon Kennedy Wynne, Times Staff Writer

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Chef Dave Del Rio, 54, of Smoke Barbecue & Grill doesn't leave anything to chance when it comes to barbecue. "I still use a cooking thermometer on every piece of meat. . . . I still use measuring spoons, utensils and thermometers," he said. "If you want something to taste the same way twice, you have to be precise."



SMOKE BARBEQUE & GRILL

{ 901 Platt St., Tampa, (813) 254-7070; smokebarbequerestaurant.com }

Putting on the table what they call "New World barbecue," Smoke is the latest project of Ceviche restaurateur mastermind Gordon Davis. Grill master **Dave Del Rio** adds a slickness to the basic barbecue scene that South Tampa seems to crave. The food coming out of the converted old brick gas station since 2008 has diners swooning over the Montreal-style smoked meat, Texas brisket, fried catfish and smoky pork ribs.

Del Rio, a Tampa native, rose through the bay area's culinary ranks, helping Outback develop its menu before taking over as director of culinary development for Lee Roy Selmon's. The vision at Smoke was "to get great traditional barbecue, but throw in something different, such as Argentinian skewers and our own homemade sauces." They also have fish and vegetarian dishes — something unheard of in many barbecue joints.

What **Del Rio** faces that the home cook can appreciate is a shortage of space. The former mechanic's space has just enough room for a refrigerator-sized smoker out back and a char-grill out front for cooking steaks and skewers as customers watch from the front counter.

"To maximize space, make sure you start off with the best ingredients, that will yield the best product," **Del Rio** said.

Have fun, he said, but don't wing it. The biggest mistake home cooks make with their steaks and burgers is overcooking them or cooking them on too hot a grill.

"I'm a professional, but I still use a cooking thermometer on every piece of meat. Even after 30 years I don't trust it without one. I still use measuring spoons, utensils and thermometers," Del Rio said. "If you want something to taste the same way twice, you have to be precise."

His suggestion: A simple, digital \$20 temperature gauge from Bed Bath & Beyond "is the best thing you can do to ensure results."

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