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From the Kansas City Business Journal:

<https://www.bizjournals.com/kansascity/news/2020/01/21/pitmaster-schwartz-victory-lap-social-jacksonville.html>

Local pitmaster infuses Jacksonville BBQ restaurant with KC flair

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A local pitmaster has infused Kansas City flair into a new barbecue restaurant in Jacksonville, Fla.

Stephen "Smokey" Schwartz, who's earned a number of barbecue competition honors, helped craft the menu at Victory Lap Social, an 8,300-square-foot restaurant that opened in December inside Jacksonville's Autobahn Indoor Speedway.

"I feel like a representative of Kansas City," he said of introducing Kansas City-style barbecue. "I'm so proud. It's like a proud parent and their kids are graduating college."

More than just firing up a grill

But the new restaurant doesn't just introduce Floridians to a different barbecue style. It exposes them to the ambiance and the history, he said.

"People don't understand — it's not just throwing food on a grill or a flattop or in a sauté pan," Schwartz said. "It's a true art."

Schwartz, a partner in Overland Park-based PB&J Restaurants Inc., started working in restaurants in high school. In the early 1980s, he got his first taste of barbecue at what's now known as Joe's Kansas City. At the time, he was a dishwasher and busboy. But one night, he noticed flickering lights behind a closed door and decided to explore. Smoke had darkened the walls to black, and chains and pulleys slowly turned meat over the flame.

"It's like nothing I'd ever seen before," Schwartz said. "From that moment, it had me. ... I knew at that point, I had to get involved with that."

Since then, Schwartz has worked at restaurants such as Fiorella's Jack Stack Barbecue and the Golden Ox. He's now the executive pitmaster and general manager of Burnt End BBQ, a restaurant he helped create with PB&J. It opened in 2010 and is readying for another area location at Crown Center. In 2018, Food Network featured Schwartz and the restaurant on the TV series, "The Grill Dads."



AMIEL ORPIANO

Kansas City pitmaster Stephen "Smokey" Schwartz helped craft the menu for Jacksonville's Victory Lap Social restaurant.

Crafting Victory Lap Social

Autobahn Indoor Speedway's Jacksonville location offers indoor go-karts and ax throwing, but it lacked adequate food options. Before Victory Lap Social, it offered only chips and soda, Autobahn Director of Operations Donald Wagner told the *Kansas City Business Journal*.

The company wanted to compete with entertainment options such as Dave & Buster's and Main Event, he said. A mutual partner introduced Autobahn to PB&J.

When the team flew to Kansas City, one of their stops was Burnt End BBQ.

"I was blown away," Wagner said.

Beyond the food, he liked Schwartz's personality and passion for barbecue, which is contagious.

"For me, it's all about authenticity," Wagner said, and that's exactly what came through with Schwartz and his barbecue.

Autobahn wanted that same authenticity with Victory Lap Social. The Florida restaurant draws inspiration from Schwartz's competition barbecue takeaways and from Burnt End BBQ, which has found success with barbecue fusion dishes. For two days, Schwartz served a variety of dishes to the Autobahn team, who helped finalize the menu. It was fun but arduous, Wagner said.

"By the end of the two days, I was exhausted," he said.

Upscale feel, variety of choices

The Victory Lap Social menu takes an upscale approach that appeals to a variety of tastes — from meat lovers to vegans. It features classics, such as burnt ends and ribs, but also smoked jack fruit street tacos, oven-roasted cauliflower steak and barbecue poutine. It also offers a variety of salads, a burnt end mac 'n' cheese bowl and a barbecue tofu bowl.

"We've incorporated a bunch of things. It's not your traditional beans, corn, meat and fries," Schwartz said. "We've tried to hit every aspect of what somebody could look for in a restaurant."

Wagner stressed that Schwartz headed to Jacksonville to train the staff so the restaurant can deliver a consistent and high-quality product. Although outsiders assume it's easy, barbecuing is a laborious process, and one miscalculation can ruin a batch of expensive meat, Wagner said.

"At the end of the day, we're selling a product we want to proud of," Wagner said.

So far, the reception has been great, he said.

Schwartz thinks so, too: "I think we've opened a lot of people's eyes up to what our barbecue is, and I'm really excited about that. I think it's going to go far."

Leslie Collins

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