AAA to BBQ

Racquel Youtzy and Tiz Pivetta's journey from barbecue amateurs to the big leagues

by Jon Sufrin

Inside a corrugated tin lean-to near the corner of Gerrard and Broadview, you'll find one of the most intense barbecue setups in the city. There, four Traeger grills operate nearly non-stop, slowly inundating beef, pork and chicken with oak smoke. Brisket and ribs emerge sheathed in crispy, candy-sweet bark, tinged deep pink beneath the

This is the culinary headquarters of AAA Bar, a mini-chain that's set to open its third location this spring. It makes some of most authentic southern food in the city, but three short years ago, AAA's founding partners, Racquel Youtzy and Tiz Pivetta, knew next to nothing about barbecue. So how did a pair of barbecue amateurs become cognoscenti so quickly?

'We just did it," says Pivetta.

The two Toronto natives met in the '90s at Vivo, a now-closed Italian restaurant on Mount Pleasant. Youtzy - bespectacled, wry sense of humour, fan of quirky GIFs - was a server back then, and Pivetta - rock star-esque, like a silver-haired Dave Grohl - was a co-owner. They clicked immediately and later went into business together with Laide, a lounge they opened at Jarvis and Adelaide in 2002. Laide was the type place where you'd find anatomically correct body casts as decor and vintage erotica projecting in the background, but it also had a well-reviewed tapas menu.

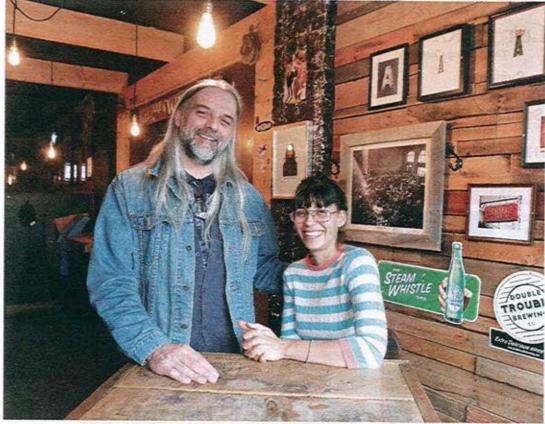
Laide did well, but by the end of its nine-year run, the neighbourhood

had matured. Youtzy and Pivetta decided to close it down to make way for a more casual, neighbourhoodfriendly drinking establishment. Something would need to be done about food, though, because pesky Ontario liquor laws dictate that all drinking establishments must also serve something to eat.

Youtzy thought she had an answer. She happened to be an ardent fan of barbecue, having spent a good amount of time in Austin, Texas (it's where her mom lives), and having done a lot of eating there. Rudy's - which smokes its meat with wood in brick pits — remains her favourite Austin eating establishment, in part because "it doesn't have the snob appeal." She even brought some food back to Toronto with her - several times so Pivetta could taste it.

This was back in 2012, when true, smoky, southern U.S.-style barbecue was really starting to become a thing in Toronto. Youtzy and Pivetta decided there was a growing market for this stuff. They just had to figure out how to do it.

Many notable pitmasters, incidentally, have learned the art of barbecue through trial and error. David Neinstein, co-owner of the highly regarded Barque restaurant on Roncesvalles, abruptly switched from a career in advertising to a career in barbecue by immersing himself in it. Tom Davis, pitmaster at the legendary Stockyards on St. Clair, is self-taught (granted, he experimented for around 15 years



Business partners Pivetta and Youtzy experimented for six months to get their BBQ just so

before opening his restaurant).

For Youtzy and Pivetta, what began on a whim turned into six months of intensive experimenting. They bought smokers and laboured on them from early morning to late night. Youtzy did brisket and chili, Pivetta did ribs and pulled pork. They sought out barbecue experts and asked questions. They searched the Internet. They modified their smokers to add more smoke. It was a lot of work to make sure drinking patrons had something to munch on.

"If you're going to do it, do it

right," Youtzy says.

In 2012, after lots of preparatory meat consumption (and a few "super scary" fires), Youtzy and Pivetta opened AAA Bar. It was, and still is, dogmatically casual. Its menus are scrawled out with pen, on lined paper. You can etch graffiti onto the tables (at least one epic game of tic-tac-toe has been preserved for posterity). Ribs come with a thick slice of Texas toast - a quarter-inch, to be precise. And although AAA

has built a reputation for its food (best ribs and brisket in the city, according to two separate Post City taste tests) it remains primarily drink focused.

There is a lot of good barbecue in T.O., but not a lot of it is authentic. Barque offers "refined" barbecue; Smoque N' Bones is a mishmash of styles; Electric Mud BBQ takes cues from Asian cuisine, coating its ribs with scallions. AAA Bar is pure central Texas-style, which means oak smoke, a thick dry-rub and sauce on the side - always on the side. AAA does make its own maple bourbon barbecue sauce, but servers offer it as an afterthought. The meat is always supposed to be the star.

The concept grew fast. AAA Bar's second location opened on Queen East last year, and a third is opening at Gerrard and Broadview - next to that smoke-filled lean-to where Mr. Ciao, Youtzy and Pivetta's shortlived Italian restaurant, once was. Opened in 2014, Mr. Ciao suffered a series of debilitating chef change ups, eventually prompting the duo to just make it another AAA Bar.

PROFILE FOOD

"The third one - AAA Pub - is going to be more food-focused," Youtzy says. The daily specials from the other bars will turn into menu mainstays, while new additions, like deep-fried Brussels sprouts and chicken-fried steaks, will be specials. A smoked burger is also in the

After nearly a year and a half of making the food themselves, Youtzy and Pivetta have hired and trained a dedicated pitmaster. His name is Pete Ward, and he too was an amateur a short while ago. He wears a John Deere trucker hat, and he cites Youtzy as a mentor. He makes wings, ribs, brisket, pulled pork and more, and he has it delivered by car to AAA's other locations, where the food is finished in an oven.

When asked if another AAA is on the horizon, Youtzy responds with an emphatic "no." But it sounds a bit like she's trying to convince herself more than anyone else.