




**DINNER
AND A SHOW**

AT TAINO PRIME

BY AMY S. WHITE

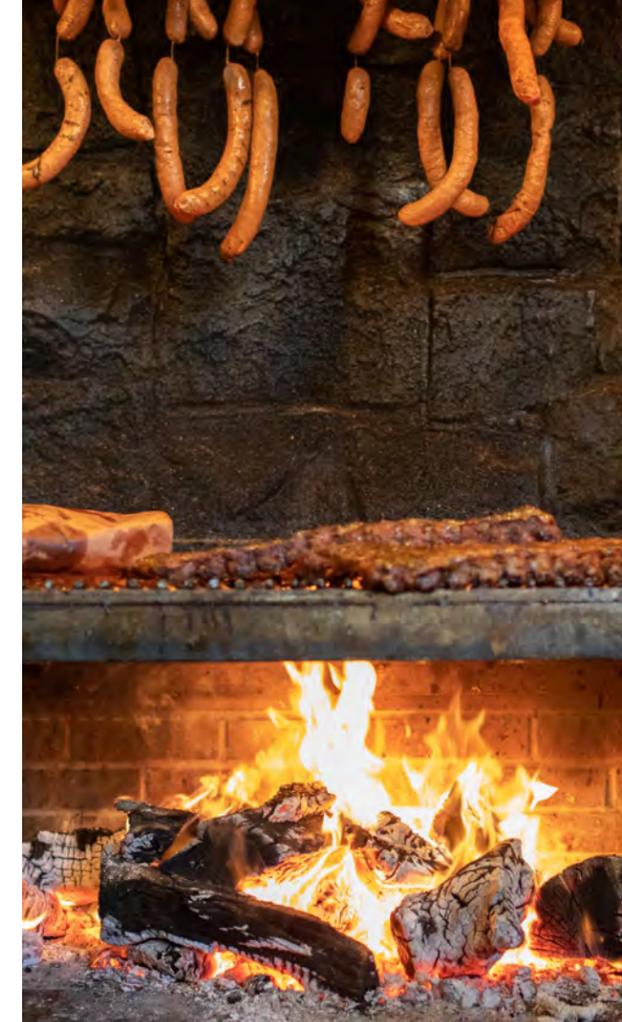
NICOLE BEDARD PHOTOS



“WELCOME TO THE CATHEDRAL OF *BARBECUE!*”

announces Van Hurd excitedly as he opens the enormous front doors into Taino Prime, where he is the executive chef and pitmaster. Indeed, the effect borders on the spiritual, from the lofty ceilings to the wooden Taino Indian sculptures that decorate the walls. Then, there’s the restaurant’s literal focus (from the Latin word for “hearth”) – a stunning wood and stone Texas-style open barbecue pit – the first of its kind on the East Coast to operate indoors.

Wanting to expand upon his popular but relatively small Middletown location, Taino Prime owner Chris Szewczyk bought the former Jacoby’s restaurant on South Main Street in Meriden with aspirations of it becoming far more than just another New England restaurant serving up basic barbecue. As the building was being renovated, Szewczyk took Hurd on a tour of America’s best barbecue joints that spanned over 5,000 miles across 23 states. The two visited such smoked-meat meccas as Pappy’s Smokehouse in St. Louis, Missouri and Franklin Barbecue in Austin, Texas, where they managed to convince some of the nation’s best pitmasters to share their secrets and offer sage advice on the art and skill of cooking with smoke





and fire. Their ultimate goal? For Taino Prime to make it into the “top ten [barbecue restaurants] in the nation,” Hurd states matter-of-factly, then pauses and with his signature mischievous grin and infectious chuckle adds, “Yes. In Connecticut.”



Not that Hurd, who was raised in Texas, is

“I’M FROM BRISKET COUNTRY. I GREW UP BARBECUING.

MY DAD ALWAYS HAD A CUSTOM SMOKER. PLAYING WITH SMOKE HAS

ALWAYS BEEN SOMETHING I WAS INTRIGUED BY.”

inexperienced in the matter. He explains, “I’m from brisket country. I grew up barbecuing. My dad always had a custom smoker. Playing with smoke has always been something I was intrigued by.” And where there’s smoke, of course there’s fire. In 2009, Hurd was thrown into Chef Gordon Ramsay’s fiery pit as a contestant on the sixth season of Fox’s “Hell’s Kitchen.” With a personality as big as his home state, he quickly became a fan favorite, and was invited back for 2017’s “Hell’s Kitchen: All-Stars.” But that first competition changed his life. That was when Hurd met Connecticut chef Kevin Cottle. The two hit it off, and on Cottle’s suggestion, Hurd moved “up North” to further his culinary career. He worked fine dining

alongside Cottle at the Farmington Country Club, did catering with Jordan Caterers, then opened Sayulita, where he brought elevated Mexican cuisine to Glastonbury. But barbecue coursed through his veins, and he became the pitmaster at Taino (Middletown) in 2016, just as Szewczyk was eyeing his second, larger location.

With Taino Prime, Szewczyk and Hurd plan to take the smokehouse concept to a higher level. Hurd sums up the three main objectives that comprise their mission: “Food. Hospitality. Theater.” At 10,000-square feet, the size of the restaurant plays a huge role in the spectacle. Separate areas, each with its own ambience and focal point, all provide the guest with a sensory overload that will bring them back, again and again, for dinner and a show. Long, community-style tables, like those in

European food halls, fill the front room, which Hurd refers to as “The Marketplace.” Here, during lunch and dinner hours, diners can view the daily menu and get in line, cafeteria-like, to choose from among the day’s offerings. Brisket, corned beef and pork butt are smoked 12-16 hours overnight. Hurd arrives in the early hours of the morning to take out those meats and replace them with turkey, baby back ribs and sausage. Finally, as Hurd states, “I judge good barbecue by the sides,” one can choose from a dozen traditional favorites like collard greens, cucumber slaw, white bean cassoulet, and what Hurd calls “tater salad.” A sauce bar, pickle bar and drink station follow, along with a charcuterie counter (yes, they are smoking their own meats and cheeses in house), and, in case anyone has room for dessert, there’s a bakery. Everything is on



**“THEIR ULTIMATE GOAL? FOR TAINO PRIME TO MAKE IT INTO THE
‘TOP TEN BARBECUE RESTAURANTS IN THE NATION... YES. IN CONNECTICUT.’”**



display, and everything is available to eat in or take home. As the name “marketplace” implies, there are goods for sale as well – Taino sauces and rubs, t-shirts and hats, even items from local farms. Think Eataly meets barbecue.

“FOOD. HOSPITALITY. *THEATER.*”

In the center of all this, diners have the experience of watching the pitmaster at work. Hurd confesses, “I’m really into cooking over open fire. As much as I can use that pit, I’m gonna’ use it.” Almost dreamy-eyed, he goes on to imagine cauldrons filled with beans and chili, sausages, whole ducks and legs of lamb, all hanging over the pit which is fueled by logs of white oak, in the tradition of central Texas. Using real wood offers the best result, a richness and complexity of wood-fire flavor that really permeates the end product.

Starting this fall, the middle section of the restaurant will feature the dinner-only “Prime Steakhouse.” Slightly less casual than “The Marketplace,” the menu here will bring fusion, technique and finesse. Hurd says one of the highlights will be the dry-aged steaks which guests can view from a window that peeks into the aging chamber. “We’re using Snake River Farms (Idaho) prime beef, the best you can get. We want to bring dry-aged steak to blue collar people.” This is also where Hurd can cull from his fine-dining and “Hell’s Kitchen” experiences and experiment with seasonal specials featuring produce from local farms and fresh pasta made in-house.

The “Steakhouse” overlooks the open kitchen, where the Grillworks wood-fired grill is in plain sight. Guests can observe as the brigade prepares their food while Hurd works the pass -- checking, garnishing and sending each plate. Cameras in the kitchen provide fodder for the restaurant’s planned YouTube channel; future videos will include guest





“IT IS FROM THE [TAINO] WORD

BARABICU,

WHICH TRANSLATES INTO

'SACRED FIRE PIT,' THAT WE GET

THE WORD BARBECUE.”

chefs, cooking demonstrations, and dinner services streaming live. For VIP guests, there will be a chef's table, right in the center of all the action.

The final area is the enormous bar. It's a luxurious space with sleek modern red leather seats and a two-inch-thick white marble bar top. A state-of-the-art tap system has been installed, and there's a long list of craft cocktails, some of which incorporate smoke. In his slow drawl, Hurd says he envisions the bar will become “A late-night place for the grown and sexy.”

Amidst all the showiness, novelty and innovation, however, are subtle reminders of the true essence of Taino Prime. The Taino, while now extinct, were a peaceful people indigenous to the Caribbean. It is from their word barabicu, which translates into “sacred fire pit,” that we get the word barbecue. And although most traces of the former Jacoby's are gone, its stately stone fireplace remains, a reminder of the past maybe, but perhaps also a sign that this place was simply destined to be.

TAINO PRIME is located at 1388 E. Main Street in Meriden. Contact them at (203) 440-1600 or via social media @tainoprime. 🐦