

Overall, it's a likable blend of Southern flavor and casual-dining mainstays.

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It's hard to miss with chef Heath Barbato's burgers and sandwiches, all under \$10 (a buck less at lunch) and served in deep baskets with an enormous pile of crisp, hot, shoestring fries.

The juicy half-pound burgers, ground fresh from aged sirloin, have a deep, robust, beefy flavor, and the buns by Detroit's Avalon bakery are tender but substantial. Add extra toppings to the basic lettuce and secret sauce for a bargain 35 cents each.

The Chicken Cobb sandwich -- with half an avocado, three or four slices of bacon, tomato, lettuce and blue cheese, plus a big grilled chicken breast -- was all about fresh ingredients and great flavors. But its size made it next to impossible to eat as a sandwich. The catfish po'boy's flavors were more muted but at least you can get your mouth around it.

I was pleased with the flavors of the Carolina pulled pork plate, mounded high with shredded, house-smoked pork shoulder and sides of excellent braised greens and very dry cheese grits. The menu called for South Carolina-style sauce with the pork, but this version is a mild, tomato-based recipe rather than the state's more traditional mustardy one.

There's another menu oddity, too: The beef brisket plate calls for peppery, vinegary North Carolina sauce, which is designed for pork.

Avoid the issue and just ask for a tray of all three house-made sauces so you can find the best match for your meat. I'd do the eastern North Carolina style with the pulled pork and the sweet and smoky Texas style with the beef.

I couldn't help noticing that the brisket plate was less generous than the pulled pork. The baby back ribs, served with shoestring fries and a lively, spicy slaw, are a better choice: sweet, tangy and satisfying.

Other entrees run toward homey comfort foods like planked meatloaf, blackened or fried catfish, roasted salmon and three kinds of saucy mac-and-cheese.

I didn't have good luck with the beer-can chicken, one of the restaurant's most popular dishes. It came with great potatoes and fresh green beans, but mine was less tender than you'd hope, and it was more sweet than tangy or savory.

Other problems included grit in the otherwise delicious arugula salad and deep-dish pecan pie that arrived about an inch thick.

Still, I liked Blue Tractor and I'll go back. A few dishes need a tune-up, but the servers, the place and the atmosphere are fun. The beer's good, too. And frankly, I just like tractors.



(Clockwise from top left)
RASHAUN
RUCKER/Detroit
Free Press)



Karen Kostamo of Ann Arbor takes a dinner break at Blue Tractor.



Nail-scarred planks and tractor grilles dress up the Blue Tractor's interior, designed by Chicago artist Jeff Atkins.

