



A Schwartz's veteran opens a halal, Jewish-style deli in a Scarborough Plaza—and yes, it's unbelievably

BY CHARLIE FRIEDMANN / JUNE 4, 2018 / RESTAURANTS

The smell in the shop is meaty and lightly smoky, overlaid with the scent of cracked black pepper, coriander seeds and hot, sweet beef fat. There are cans of Cott Black Cherry soda in the fridge, and plump dill pickles on offer next to the cash. Curiously, two of the cars parked just outside the brand-new deli

SumiLicious Smoked Meat & Deli

are marked with Quebec plates.

But the surest sign this place takes smoked meat seriously is behind the counter: the steaming, spice-crusting beef brisket. A smiling man who appears to be the owner here is going at it with a knife. As he welcomes guests to his new shop, he flicks the blade across the brisket with what can only be years of practice. Did you want your smoked meat lean, medium, fatty, or—the best of both worlds—medium fatty? Thick, dark pink strips fall onto his cutting board, gleaming with juices and fat.

SumiLicious Smoked Meat & Deli opened in April in a plaza at Steeles Avenue East and Middlefield Road, a few minutes east of Pacific Mall. And in spite of the name and the location—Scarborough has never, to my knowledge, been a hotbed for proper Montreal-style smoked meat—being here feels a little like stumbling into Schwartz's, in my hometown of Montreal. This isn't a coincidence.

The man slicing the meat is Sumith Fernando, Sumi to his friends (hence: SumiLicious). Mr. Fernando learned the deli trade at Schwartz's. He worked at the shop for 15 years, he says, before relocating here in January to open SumiLicious along with Shalika De Fonseca, his wife.

Through all those years at Schwartz's, first as a kitchen helper, and later as a counterman, Mr. Fernando noticed that a lot of his customers had come from Scarborough and Markham, visiting Montreal on food pilgrimages. And so he came here, to check out the neighbourhood. He saw that there were no real delis in the area—and definitely nowhere with good smoked meat. What he and Ms. De Fonseca have built qualifies as that, and then some.

His brisket's crust is full of crunch from the coarsely ground spices, and its interior is bright pink from the curing and smoke. Mr. Fernando works quickly but with care, pulling the whole cuts from a steamer behind the counter, then slicing and stacking thick slices of meat onto rye from Toronto's Future Bakery, with a smear of yellow mustard. The rye is airier, a touch more rye-forward in flavour, and sliced a bit thicker than the bread I remember at Schwartz's, but who really cares? Both serve mainly as instruments for keeping your hands almost-clean while inhaling the meat.

And that meat is worth the price of admission, or if you're coming here from distance, which you should, the drive. The rich beefy flavour is enhanced by melting pockets of fat, a whiff of smoke, and the crunch of the crust. This



Critic's Pick

5631 Steeles Avenue East, Unit 5,
Toronto,
647-347-8899,
sumilicious.ca

Cuisine: Canadian

Atmosphere: A bright, friendly deli. Counter service.

Sound: Imagine you're inside a cement mixer. Filled with very large speakers.

Prices: large smoked meat sandwiches are \$9; combos (with drink and fries) are \$13.

Drinks: Cott Cherry Soda, obviously. Other bottled options are available.

What to eat: The smoked meat sandwich is the go-to; it's available in whatever fattiness level you like. Have a pickle and a poutine and you're set for a week. Plenty other options, though, and they're worth exploring.

place tastes like Schwartz's. It's by far the best smoked meat I've had in town.

And although the story of SumiLicious begins in Sri Lanka, where the couple lived until 20 years ago, and takes a long pause in Montreal, it's also, in a way, a distinctly Toronto tale. It's hard to imagine any other town on earth where you'd find a Montreal Jewish-style delicatessen owned and operated by Sri Lankan-Canadians, with a largely Chinese and Caribbean immigrant customer base (word of SumiLicious hasn't yet reached much outside the neighbourhood), where the flavours are on the money, and the meat, by the way, is certified halal.

Mr. Fernando moved to Canada in 2002. His first job was as a kitchen helper at Schwartz's. He hated it, he says. He quit after two weeks. Restaurant grunt work wasn't his Canadian dream.

He took a job at a packaging company, working for a year alongside Ms. De Fonseka. Warehouse work was no dream either. So in 2003, Mr. Fernando returned to the 90-year-old Montreal institution, eventually rising from kitchen helper to work as one of the meat slicers at the front of the shop, which he did for about eight years.

Though his smoked meat is clearly inspired by Schwartz's, Mr. Fernando is quick to note that the recipe at SumiLicious is all his own. He had to reverse-engineer the flavours and textures, tinkering until he landed on a recipe he believed to be on par with the meat he used to slice into some 700 sandwiches a day in Montreal.

The couple moved here in January and opened in April. They noticed a large Muslim population in the neighbourhood, so chose to buy beef that was

certified Halal.

The process begins with whole briskets that are dry-rubbed with a mix of black pepper, coriander, pink salt, and other spices and cured for 10 days. Once cured, the meat is then smoked for about eight hours in the back of the shop, before being steamed for another three to four hours for service.

As I take my first bite, I'm immediately searching for faults. Perhaps the brisket could stand to have a little more spice mix crusting the outside? But the next bite finds more crunch and I'm honestly at a loss. Sometimes you have to admit defeat, especially when defeat means a delicious sandwich.

Beef is king here, but in addition to whole briskets, a couple days' advance order can also secure a whole chicken, turkey, or duck smoked with the same spice blend as the smoked meat. I haven't tried them, but I'm intrigued.

On the side, there are those dill pickles by the cash—sourced from Putters in Quebec—served whole, and properly crunchy and refreshing. The vinegared coleslaw, made from green cabbage and a little carrot, provides another respite from the fatty meat. It, too, tastes like home to me, but the cabbage is sliced in an oddly thin and long shape—almost as if put through a spiralizer—leaving me longing for just a little more heft and crunch.

There are good fries here, and decent poutine.

There are also other sandwiches available: cold cut salami and turkey and a satisfyingly spicy grilled chicken topped with cabbage slaw. It's inspired by the many Portuguese chicken shops in Montreal, but with some Sri Lankan spice thrown in for good measure. It's a solid sandwich, but when the smoked meat's this great, I don't know why you would.

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