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King David's amazing dogs

by David Hoppe

The hot dog mansion has many rooms – that's what makes it a mansion. But you'd never know it where I come from, Chicago. That city is full of hot dog bullies who will snarl and apply a hobnail boot to the seat of your pants if you so much as wave a bottle of ketchup near one of their splendiferous creations.

Happily, Indianapolis has a hot dog mansion of its own and this joint is big enough to accommodate just about anybody with a taste for a plush pup. King David Dogs (15 N. Pennsylvania St.) has been operating out of a lovely old downtown storefront since 2006, but the place feels like it's been there since the days when men wore white shirts to baseball games. It's open Monday through Friday from 11 a.m. until 4 and one day last week, it was packed by 11:30.

The hot dogs served here are pure beef quarter pounders that are an arrestingly vivid red. They're based on a local Hene Brothers recipe that dates back to the 1940s and could be found in grocers here for over 50 years. After a hiatus, the recipe's been resurrected by William Hene's grandson, Brent Joseph, and the dogs are replicated by Usinger's, a classic Milwaukee wurst maker.

They are amazing.

The Hene dog is thicker and more flavorful – a strong hint of garlic, I think – than any dog I've had the pleasure to know. This is a no-doubt-about-it meat dish and a mouthful. Where many hot dogs are more snarfed than eaten, a King David deserves a little time for your taste buds to catch up with the larger dimension of the experience.

I started with – what else? – a Chicago Dog (\$4.99). Other cities can say what they will, the genius of this flavor combination has never been topped. The red tomato, shocking green relish, yellow mustard, white onion (with hot peppers and a pickle spear for good measure) create a virtual rainbow in the mouth that's sweet, sour, spicy and salty all at once. Tucked into a poppy seed bun from Chicago's Gonnella bakery, this is powerful stuff.

But we didn't stop there. The State Fair Dog (\$3.99) is King David's take on the corn dog. It comes wrapped in tin foil with a side of mustard for dipping. With the foil stripped away, it looks like an old-time cartoonist's idea of a Russian H-bomb, big and hefty, with a dapper sheath of corn breading that's slightly sweet and buttery. Compared to the Chicago, this is a minimalist approach.

Whereas there's something almost gory about the BBQ Dog (\$4.79). Its barbeque sauce, melted cheddar, onions and bacon slice appear to have been applied with a palette knife. The sauce is excellent, smoky and sweet, and the bacon adds a dimension to the beef that is positively voluptuous.

The South of the Border Dog (\$4.99) is another over-the-top presentation, with beans, nacho cheese, sliced jalapenos and salsa. This particular fantasia on the hot dog theme proved to be a little more than the bun could handle – it was soaked.

A side of fries (\$1.49) came in a paper cup. Like everything else at King David, they were thick and flavorful. A quick look around the crammed dining area suggested that the Tater Tots (\$1.49) are also a hit.

If you're feeling adventurous (or not), you can choose from 18 different toppings and have your dog any way you want. In King David's hot dog mansion, that's called having a room of one's own.

King David Dogs
15 N. Pennsylvania St.
Phone: 632-DOGS
Fax: 632-3645

www.kingdaviddogs.com

info@kingdaviddogs.com

HOURS:
Mon.–Fri. 11a.m. to 4 p.m.
FOOD: 4 stars
ATMOSPHERE: 4 stars
SERVICE: 4 stars