



AJ'S MEAT SHACK

BY RICH BELMONT

By now everyone knows you can get some pretty terrific food from a food truck. So have you tried the food truck parked behind the Sandy Hook Tavern in Hazel Green, Wisconsin?



↑ The Lawrence family from left to right: Jena, Lyla, Remi, and Ashley

Well ok, it's technically a food trailer and it is owned by Ashley Lawrence and his wife Jena (pronounced Gee-na). They opened May, 2014 to serve as the outdoor kitchen for the tavern. It is in the parking lot right next to an outdoor bar and stage where local and touring bands play at least twice a week. There are several picnic tables in the area so when you receive your selection of scrumptious food truck favorites you can sit right down and join the party.

And when I say you will be choosing your food truck favorites I am not exaggerating. Once you have tried AJ's Meat Shack a couple of times you will find there are things on the menu you will want to have again and again. That's because the food is quite fantabulous.

For starters the trailer is equipped with a flat top grill, a charcoal grill, and a wood pellet smoker. Some of the produce such as the tomatoes are grown in Ashley's own garden. He makes his own BBQ sauce which is a chunky sauce made from onions and brown sugar and seasonings. Ashley describes it as a Kentucky style flavored sauce somewhere between a Kansas City and Carolina BBQ. His homemade rub used on his smoked meats is a mixture of 13 carefully balanced seasonings not quite sweet and not quite spicy.

The coleslaw is prepared according to Jena's recipe. It is both sweet and tart because it is made with lemon, mayonnaise and a little green apple.

All the beef cooked in this meat shack is supplied by Hauber Brand Meats in Dickeyville, WI. Hauber is a local meat purveyor in business since 1948.

The burgers are cooked on the flat top grill. They are one quarter pound patties and you can order them as singles, doubles or triples. There are the usual choices of Plain Jane, Cheeseburger or Bacon Cheeseburger. There is the little more adventurous Shroom & Cheddar containing sautéed onions and button mushrooms and aged cheddar cheese. Or you can be a hero and go for one of these specialty burgers:

Goodburger: American cheese, twice smoked grilled ham and cheddar.

The Mama: Ketchup on the top bun and peanut butter on the bottom with American cheese.

AJ's Western: Bacon, sautéed onions, aged cheddar, tomato, topped with Ashley's special BBQ sauce.



All the sandwiches are available as Sammiches (on rolls), or in wraps or quesadillas. The rolls and the tortillas for the wraps and quesadillas are supplied by Sutter Bakery in East Dubuque.



I like the AJ's Steakum sandwich a lot. It is made with tender, shaved Ribeye steak grilled with sautéed onions and button mushrooms and topped with Jena's houseslaw, aged cheddar and mayo.



As much as I like the Steakum sometimes I can't resist the chicken. Both the BBQ Chicken and the Drunk Chicken are delicious. Ashley takes brined whole chickens and smokes them on beer cans. Keeping the chickens intact and upright in their skins insures the meat remains tender and juicy. The BBQ Chicken is a generous amount of hand pulled bird topped with aged cheddar, houseslaw and AJ's BBQ sauce. The Drunk version is my favorite. The pulled chicken is specially seasoned and served with lettuce, tomato and mayo.



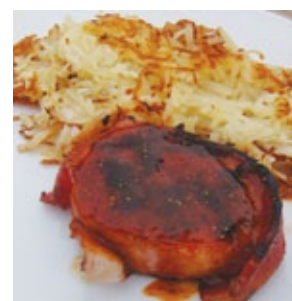
The Grampy is an exceptional Sammich: Cure 81 smoked ham is smoked a second time and Ashley's BBQ sauce is added along with aged cheddar cheese. The Grammy is similar to the Grampy only this one is made with twice smoked grilled turkey instead of ham.



AJ's BLT is not a typical BLT. Ashley takes the bacon, lettuce, tomato and mayo favorite then spices it up with his BBQ sauce and the addition of his exclusive Candy Bacon. He makes this by taking uncured bacon strips, smoking them and then searing them before topping them with AJ's BBQ sauce. These strips sort of taste like pork jerky candy and are really, really good!



Now that I am an experienced regular at AJ's Meat Shack I know to be on the lookout for the Weekly Specials. These are where Ashley demonstrates his expertise in smoking and charcoal grilling. I was lucky enough to be there when he had Bacon Wrapped Pork Chops. They were grilled to perfection with crunchy exterior and moist centers. You might get lucky if you are there when he has Beef Short Ribs or Charcoal Grilled Sirloin Steaks or AJ's Chicken Thangers. This last item consists of 3 pieces of chicken breast dipped in buttermilk, covered with AJ's rub, wrapped in bacon and smoked.



Before I stop raving about the food I must mention the Hashbrowns. These shredded potatoes are simply fried on the flat top and sprinkled with a special house seasoning and they are exceptionally tasty. You can order them as a side dish or as a whole meal called

Hooker Hashbrowns which includes any of the Sammich meats and American cheese.

Sandy Hook Tavern and AJ's Meat Shack are well known for their sponsorships of many local charitable events. (Did I mention Ashley owns the Tavern too?). On most Fridays there are Bike Nights held for the benefit of 13 different charitable organizations. On these nights motorcyclists come to listen to the music and generously donate to the charity of the evening. Some of the beneficiaries of their generosity include: Toys for Tots, Research for Kids, Wisconsin Badger Camp, Disabled American Veterans, Camp Albrecht Acres and the Southwestern Wisconsin Road Crew Demand/Response Taxi Service.

This Friday (August 14) there is a dinner cruise to Shedly's Bar & Grill in Montfort, WI benefitting the Southwestern Wisconsin Road Crew.

During the summer season there are live music events three nights per week. This Friday the music is provided by Framing the Red, a Southern Rock N Roll band that has been touring for three years and is based in Natchez, MS.

AJ's Meat Shack is on wheels and is definitely mobile but it is parked semi-permanently at Sandy Hook Tavern because it already has become a destination eatery. Come for the food, stay for the music and be advised hours of operation will be reduced in September in preparation for the fall season.



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3868 Sandy Hook Road, Hazel Green, WI 53811

608-732-1992 • SandyHookTavern.com

[Facebook.com/SandyHookTavern](https://www.facebook.com/SandyHookTavern)

Hours: Summer Season: Wed-Sat: 5 PM-Close; Sun: 5-9 PM; Fall Season: Wed-Sat: 10 PM-2 AM; Sun: 5-9 PM

Dining Style: Come as you are

Recommendations: Goodburger, AJ's Western Burger, AJ's BLT, BBQ Chicken, Drunk Chicken, AJ's Steakum, The Grampy, Hooker Hashbrowns, Candy Bacon

Liquor Service: Full Bar at Sandy Hook Tavern

Prices: \$3.75-\$9.00

Pay Options: Cash Only

Accessibility: No

Kids Policy: No Menu; No High Chairs; No Booster Seats

Reservations: No • **Catering:** Yes • **Take Out:** Yes

Delivery: No • **Parking:** Large Private Lot

