

BY MICHAEL BAUER

Wood Tavern dishes up bold flavors, welcoming vibe



The packed and popular dining room at Wood Tavern, which took the place of Grasshopper on Oakland's College Avenue.

“We were all sad when Grasshopper closed,” said an Oakland friend who lives just a few blocks from Wood Tavern, which took over the space when the popular Asian-inspired restaurant closed. “But in the end, I think I like Wood Tavern better.”

She said that as she slathered rich rabbit rillettes onto warm, crunchy toast, part of the butcher block platter

(\$14), which also contains thin coins of salami, and lean, tissue-thin slices of house-smoked duck breast. We then moved on to crispy pork belly confit (\$11), another dish that spectacularly proved her point. A thick pork-rind-like crust caps the long, striated slab of meat and fat, served with Yukon potatoes, a soft-boiled egg, spinach and shallot-sherry vinaigrette.

She's truly an eater after my own stomach. Of course, it could be a bit of the “Love the One You're With”

syndrome because Grasshopper was a great restaurant, too, and was in the Top 100 each year it was open. Grasshopper owners Donald and Crossley Dellis wanted to spend more time with their small children and sold to Richard and Rebekah Wood, who divested themselves of Frascati in San Francisco so they could have a business closer to their East Bay home.

While the physical structure is the same — a long bar centered on one wall and another counter seating area

around an open grill, which is now the saute station — the Asian accents have been wiped away in favor of a Mediterranean look, with a high ceiling, sage green walls and wood floors replacing the concrete and black, wrought-iron chandeliers.

The din is as deafening as ever, yet the vibe is completely different, like a very good pub in an industrial loftlike setting.

The restaurant has been a hit since it opened in February — not just for



Above: Dungeness crab salad with prosciutto, frisee, radicchio, quinoa and scallions; below, pan-roasted half chicken with fingerling potatoes and artichokes.



the food crafted by Max DiMare but because of the warm service, orchestrated by the Woods. While reservations are accepted, walk-ins are treated with respect and end up leaving satisfied, even if they can't wait for a seat. When customers do wait, the staff will often bring them a taste of wine, and someone continually lets them know what's going on.

While waiting one night, I discovered the artistry of bartender Albert Mendoza. The proof is in the drinks — the best Manhattan I've

had in I can't remember how many years — and in the meticulous way he constructs each cocktail. On several occasions I saw him adjust the flavorings in individual drinks to taste, then zest the lemon or slice the orange to order.

The food menu, consisting of about seven first courses and nine main courses that can change daily, is just as meticulously conceived and executed. The combinations seem familiar, but there's always one or two additions that set things apart.

That's the case with halibut (\$22), sauteed and arranged atop creamy corn polenta, with English peas, hazelnut brown butter and cool watercress. Pan-roasted chicken (\$19) has the added crunch of toasted bread-crumbs, and the accent of artichokes, fingerling potatoes, sauteed spinach and a restrained drizzle of natural juices fortified with lemon and rosemary.

I'm disappointed with the soup at many places, but here the combinations are so enticing I had to order it on each visit. The first time it was cream of asparagus teetering on the edge of rosemary overload; the second was sausage and farro with a rich tomato broth that was good but could have been absolutely lyrical with a little more restraint with the herbs. On my third visit, the soup was an exceptional black bean (\$7) that took on the meaty character of the accompanying bits of chorizo with a swirl of chile cream and scallions in the center to smooth it all out.

Seared tuna (\$13) is served slightly chilled, the two thick slices strewn with diced cucumbers and set on a bed of artichokes, olives and thin slices of roasted peppers; a Parmesan vinaigrette modulates and unifies the components. The arugula salad (\$8), mixed with slices of asparagus, fennel, toasted almonds and Pecorino cheese, is washed in sprightly lemon vinaigrette, offering a fresh taste of spring.

About the only appetizer that didn't measure up was the tartare of beef tenderloin (\$11), its flavor dulled by tomato chile vinaigrette.

While there is always a respectable vegetarian main course, such as a mushroom couscous with zucchini, asparagus, broccolini and artichoke salsa (\$13), meat dominates the selections, whether it's a grilled hanger steak (\$23) with slices of potatoes sauteed in brown butter, peeled asparagus and a sprinkling of green onion salsa verde, or a great hamburger (\$12) served on a baguette with twice-fried potatoes that remain crisp even as they cool. It's one of the best burgers and fries I've tasted in recent memory.

(Continued on page 43)

Esoteric imports pack this list

Wood Tavern calls itself a California/American restaurant, but the wine list is going the way of many these days, with most of the selections from outside the Golden State. Of the nearly 70 wines on the list, more than half are imports.

It used to be that California was kingpin in the Bay Area, but with rising prices it's becoming cheaper to ship wines across the ocean than to truck them 60 miles.

Owner Rich Wood has collected some interesting, esoteric wines, including the 2003 Movia Ribolla from Slovenia (\$38), which was awarded 91 points by Wine & Spirits magazine, and the 2004 Gultu Carjanti from Sicily (\$36). Those are mixed in with more familiar names such as 2006 Honig Sauvignon Blanc (\$32).

In red wines, the list features such things as 2005 Tiefenbrunner Castel Turmhof Lagrein from Alto Adige (\$38) and the 2003 Domaine Roulot Montheilie (\$65). In fact, Pinot Noirs make up the bulk of the list, with representative wines from Sonoma, Oregon, Santa Barbara, Russian River and Santa Lucia Highlands from where you'll find the 2005 Lucia (\$60).

More than a quarter of the wines — 19 — are offered by the glass (\$7-\$13). Markups are average, with diners getting a better deal on the more expensive wines (which top out at \$75 a bottle for the 1999 Talenti Brunello di Montalcino). It's an appropriate range for a neighborhood bistro, and all the selections are designed to go with Max DiMare's creations.

In addition, there's a full bar, and the classic cocktails are superb (see review). If you bring your own wine, corkage is \$15. — M.B.

Wood Tavern

(Continued from page 41)

Duck breast (\$22) is often disappointing, but at Wood Tavern it's a highlight. Rosy pieces were fanned over hazelnut wild rice with roasted mushrooms, broccolini and spiced tangerine honey that added a great sweet component but never became cloying. Grilled double pork chop (\$23) is just as well prepared, arranged on olive oil mashed potatoes, cipollini onions and a stewy compote of roasted peppers and tomatoes.

As with the appetizers, only one



Seafood salad with monkfish, Manila clams, mussels, calamari, linguica and fennel.

WOOD TAVERN

6317 College Ave. (near Alcatraz), Oakland, (510) 654-6607

Open for lunch 11:30 a.m.-3:30 p.m. Monday-Saturday; dinner 5:30-10 p.m. Monday-Thursday, until 10:30 p.m. Friday-Saturday. Open 12:30-8:30 p.m. Sunday. (Limited menu served 3:30-5:30 p.m. Monday-Saturday.) Full bar. Reservations and credit cards accepted. Street parking, moderately difficult.

Overall	★★★
Food	★★★
Service	★★★
Atmosphere	★★½
Prices	\$\$\$
Noise Rating	●

Pluses: Exceptional renderings of familiar items such as hanger steak, halibut. Excellent hamburger and fries, soups and desserts, including profiteroles. First-rate cocktails. Friendly, professional service.

Minuses: In a few cases some dishes are overseasoned with herbs. Noise can be distracting.

RATINGS KEY

★★★★ Extraordinary ★★★ Excellent
★★ Good ★ Fair □ Poor

(\$) Inexpensive: entrees \$10 and under

(\$\$) Moderate: \$11-\$17

(\$\$\$) Expensive: \$18-\$24

(\$\$\$\$) Very Expensive: more than \$25

Prices are based on main courses. When entrees fall between these categories, the prices of appetizers help determine the dollar ratings.

● Pleasantly quiet (less than 65 decibels)

●● Can talk easily (65-70)

●●● Talking normally gets difficult (70-75)

●●●● Can talk only in raised voices (75-80)

●●●●● Too noisy for normal conversation (80+)

Chronicle critics make every attempt to remain anonymous. All meals are paid for by The Chronicle. Star ratings are based on a minimum of three visits. Ratings are updated continually based on at least one revisit.

dish sank to mediocrity: pasta with lamb ragout and olives (\$18). The rigatoni was overcooked, but the main problem was the excess of rosemary that hit the palate like a Scud missile. DiMare, who also worked at Frascati, Paragon and Scala's, packs loads of flavor into his food, but on rare occasions he steps over the line.

Fortunately, desserts are of the same caliber as the best savory courses. The warm chocolate cake (\$8) has a great crispy crust that makes it all the better, cooled with a scoop of ice cream. The cobbler (\$8) made with pears and berries is also stellar.

As with the soup, the profiteroles (\$7) change daily. One time they were filled with orange cream; another time, chocolate mint ice cream. An-

other riffed on Almond Joy with coconut ice cream, nuts and a drizzle of chocolate sauce.

It's a pleasure to see these subtle updates, changed enough to keep a dish interesting but still appease regular customers who want their pork chop or profiteroles. Wood House's tree-lined stretch of College Avenue has a strong neighborhood identity; the Woods have not only captured the spirit of the region, but with the help of DiMare they've also made their 50-seat restaurant a destination for discriminating diners everywhere. ♦

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