

Destination Sensation

Wood Tavern

Charms With
Robust Repast

BY STETT HOLBROOK
PHOTOGRAPHY BY LORI EANES

||| get right to it: Wood Tavern is the most thoroughly delicious, enjoyable restaurant to open in Oakland this year. It's supposed to be a neighborhood restaurant, but it's become a destination. >>





Although it's been in business only since February, the madly popular Rockridge restaurant feels like it's been here for a long time. The lichen-green walls, dark wood accents and zinc-topped bar give the place a burnished, homey feel. The front-of-the-house staff, many of whom have known one another for years, move about the dining room with a confidence and ease that adds to the welcoming vibe. And the food—seasonal, ingredient-focused American cuisine that speaks with a Mediterranean accent—is flat-out great.

But this is no overnight success: Wood Tavern is the latest venture of veteran restaurateurs Rich and Rebekah Wood. Tired of bridge traffic and a bay-bifurcated life, as well as a desire to start a family, the Woods sold their acclaimed San Francisco restaurant, Frascati, in hopes of opening a new place closer to home in Oakland.

"All the arrows were pointing toward the East Bay," says Rebekah Wood. When they came across a location on College Avenue, the pieces fell together. That space was the soon-to-be-vacated Grasshopper, a long-

time Rockridge favorite. While fans of that restaurant no doubt lament its passing, it's hard to stay glum now that Wood Tavern is here.

The restaurant has generated more buzz than a swarm of killer bees. And for good reason. In addition to snagging a great location, the Woods scored when they convinced chef Max DiMare to cross the bay with them. DiMare had been executive chef at Frascati, and his menu of simple,



robust and expertly prepared food is the heart of the restaurant.

Although it sounds a little over-the-top, the pork belly confit starter (\$11) is surprisingly light. The pork belly is airy and crisp, and the shallot-sherry vinaigrette helps lighten the load of the soft-boiled egg and roasted Yukon gold potatoes served with it.

Ahi tartare has become de rigueur, but here the appetizer (\$14) gets new life when paired with a cool yet spicy jumble of creamy, sweet bay shrimp.

The perfectly dressed arugula and asparagus salad (\$8), topped with toasted almonds, pecorino cheese and sliced fennel, is spring on a plate. And don't miss the creamy roasted-tomato soup (\$7) if it's on the menu.

From the list of entrees, the sautéed halibut (\$22) set me back in my seat, it was so good. The succulent, well-crustured fillet rested on a molten lake of creamy polenta, with barely cooked corn kernels



and sweet English peas strewn about. The seared duck breast (\$23) was perhaps the most tender I've ever had. The fat lobes of juicy, caramelized meat are served with pan-fried spaetzle, just-shucked fava beans and luxurious chunks of porcini mushrooms. If that's not enough, the duck is anointed with an earthy, rich porcini-foie gras sauce.

The lunch menu features a few excellent sandwiches, including the Niman Ranch burger (\$9). Served on a sturdy, toasted baguette with house-made pickles, this burger is an instant classic, and the thin, shatteringly crisp fries are compulsively edible. I loved the bacon sandwich (\$9), too. Moistened with a spicy, roasted-tomato vinaigrette, and larded with apple-wood smoked bacon, Point Reyes blue cheese and avocado, it's a decidedly upscale BLT.

Our waitress one night said she's been working for the Woods for 10 years and has known chef DiMare for just as long. That kind of longevity is almost unheard of in the restaurant business. "It's like a family," she said. The rapport between staff and owners rubs off in the dining room. In spite of the din and the crowds, there's an easy charm that permeates the restaurant. The servers and bartenders are knowledgeable and attentive and can discuss the menu as if they were talking about their mothers' cooking.

The wines are priced to sell rather than scare you off. The most expensive bottle I saw was about \$80. Most go for between \$30 and \$50. Beyond the

prices, what appealed to me was the array of lesser known varietals and wineries. This is a wine lover's wine list that invites deep exploration.

Then again, Wood Tavern is a haven for cocktail lovers, too. Each day the menu features several classic cocktails handcrafted by the bar's expert mix-masters. If there's a better margarita in town, I haven't had it. Too bad the bar absorbs overflow for the dining room, with people supping instead of just sipping.

Desserts are good but don't fly as high as the rest of menu. What you get are perfectly adequate standards like the mint chip ice cream profiteroles (\$7), a silken and jiggly vanilla panna cotta topped with strawberry granita (\$7) and a melt-in-your mouth chocolate cake (\$8).

Someday, people like me will stop writing about Wood Tavern, and the buzz will ease up, and it will be possible to walk in on a weeknight and grab a table without a reservation. Or maybe not. With its outstanding menu, professional service and welcoming glow, it wouldn't surprise me if the queue just grew longer. ■

OPENING PAGE: Crusty and succulent sautéed halibut rests on a bed of creamy polenta, garnished with corn kernels and sweet English peas. OPPOSITE PAGE: Wood Tavern's beautifully presented ahi tartare eclipses more conventional versions (left); Rich Wood pours one of the restaurant's many priced-to-sell wines featured on a wine list that invites deep exploration (right). THIS PAGE: The apple-wood smoked bacon sandwich is one of chef Max DiMare's many unique spins on lunch classics (top left); diners enjoy the tavern's burnished, homey ambience (top right); Rich and Rebekah Wood set the welcoming tone in their popular Rockridge destination (above).

THE DETAILS

WOOD TAVERN. American. Serves lunch and dinner 11:30 a.m.–10 p.m. Mon.–Thu., 11:30 a.m.–10:30 p.m. Fri.–Sat., 11:30 a.m.–4 p.m. Sun. 6317 College Ave. (510) 654-6607. CCY ☎ \$\$\$