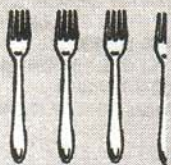


WOOD TAVERN



(overall value rating of our visit; out of a possible 5)

FOOD

REVIEW VISIT APRIL 21 & 24

- **CUISINE:** Modern American.
- **PRICES:** \$\$\$ (dinner entrees \$13-\$23).
- **CHECK:** Dinner: \$163.13 (four appetizers, three entrees, three desserts, and \$34 worth of beverages).
- **HOME RUN:** Pastrami sandwich.
- **STRIKEOUT:** French Onion Soup.
- **VEGETARIAN:** Grains and Greens is a dinner-menu staple; kitchen is open to improvisation.
- **FREEBIES:** Acme and/or La Farine bread and butter.
- **DESSERTS:** Chef Maximilian DiMare oversees the homemade desserts. Profiteroles and flourless chocolate cake are good choices.
- **BEVERAGES:** Full bar with hip cocktails. Excellent European wine selections by the glass and a thoughtful one-page midpriced list with lots of pinot noir options.



(Service, ambience rating)

WHO, WHAT, WHEN

- **WHERE:** 6317 College Ave. (at Alcatraz Avenue), Oakland.
- **HOURS:** 11:30 a.m.-10 p.m. Mondays-Thursdays; 11:30 a.m.-10:30 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays; Sunday is currently 11:30 a.m.-4 p.m., but dinner service is planned soon. Limited menu available from 3:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m.
- **CONTACT:** 510-654-6607.
- **RESERVATIONS:** Recommended for both lunch and dinner.
- **NOISE LEVEL:** Bar can get loud at night.
- **SERVICE POINT:** Professional and relaxed.
- **PARKING:** Challenging meter and residential parking. Rockridge BART is a 10-minute walk away.
- **DINING ALONE:** Bar seating is accessible in early evening and throughout lunch.
- **SPECIAL AREA:** Window tables are quieter.
- **KIDS:** Burgers, fries and plain pasta available. Busy bar in evening might be inappropriate for children.
- **PRIVATE PARTIES:** Small dining room can accommodate up to 20.
- **DATE OPENED:** Feb. 8, 2007.

WEEKEND DINING OUT



NADER KHOURI/TIMES

RICH AND REBEKAH WOOD have answered the call from modern diners looking for a warm place to connect with their community.

Soulful Tavern finds its groove

By Nicholas Boer
TIMES STAFF WRITER

On the second day, Rich and Rebekah Wood christened their creation Wood Tavern. The sign outside said Wood House, but that, they discovered, was premature.

"You wait for the baby to be born before you name it," Rebekah says.

Polished hickory floors, an erect pole of cedar and artful allusions to trees evoke the word "tavern," as did the soulful way diners were connecting with the Woods' new restaurant. So the Oakland couple, who previously owned Frascati in San Francisco, knew this relaxed Rockridge venture called for a more convivial term.

The food, by chef Maximilian DiMare, is at once refined and rustic, delivering bold flavors and hardy portions in a pretty package. The brutish-sounding Butcher Block, for instance, brings a delicate white plate bejeweled with bites of fine charcuterie.



THE BUTCHER BLOCK is meaty, but with a feminine sensibility.

I wrote enthusiastically about DiMare in 2001 — when he was just 24 years old — after dining at Paragon in Berkeley, where he was the opening chef. His gutsy versions of mussels, bruschetta and mac & cheese would be right at home in this environment.

DiMare's connection to Rich

goes back to when he was a line cook at Scala in S.F. (where Rich was the G.M.), and DiMare eventually wound up as chef at Frascati. By the time Wood Tavern opened, the team was battle-tested — primed for the surprising crush of patrons.

Rich acts as "the glue," as Rebekah puts it, with workdays that can start at 6 a.m. and finish at 1 a.m. His duties include overseeing the bar, wine program and "all things macro."

"I kind of kiss the babies and answer the phone," Rebekah says. Both owners are ever-present in the dining room.

Rebekah does it with an eye-locking, be-here-now intensity that draws customers in and back. After being sat in a lovely corner and forgotten for 20 minutes, I found Rebekah so empathetic that I wanted to apologize to her. For someone who drops lines like "spread the love," she radiates easy authority over the dining room and staff — many of whom followed the Woods from San Francisco.

Our waitress was mortified at the wait and quickly brought a Butcher Block (\$14) — a cool conduit to cocktails and conversation. An egg-sized quenelle of rabbit rillettes is the star here. DiMare cures and slow-cooks the meat in duck fat and shreds it by hand to produce a rough-textured spread with just a hint of warm spice. Thin rounds of fatty, assertive Fra' Mani Salami and ethereal, rosy slices of juniper-cured smoky duck breast are also meltingly tender. I found the dollop of whole-grain mustard too pungent for such delicacies, but enjoyed the tangle of purple-tinged wine-braised onions.

DiMare's salads (\$8) are killer. Just the right level of lemon on a toss of asparagus and arugula harmonizes the bitter-sweet elements, while a deep bowl of chopped romaine celebrates the ever-popular trio of walnuts, apple and blue cheese (Point Reyes Original here).

The House Smoked Salmon



NADER KHOURI/TIMES

WICKED GOOD SEAFOOD STEW has become a signature dish.

From previous page

Salad (\$11) utilizes the oily seafood to powerful effect. Set off by radish and bitter lettuces and softened with avocado and tiny buttery croutons, the flavorful fish coats each forkful like dressing. It's a fun, textural salad to eat.

Only one dish struck an off note. French Onion Soup (\$7), made with veal stock and crusted with focaccia croutons and gruyere cheese, turned sugary from a long reduction of white wine and marsala. Bits of resinous rosemary cut through the sweetness, but distracted from the gutsy thrust of this classic. A Carrot-Ginger Soup (\$7), fortified by good stock, was more satisfying.

Already a signature dish, Wicked Good Seafood Stew (lunch \$17, dinner \$22), earns its name. DiMare starts with a tomato broth scented with fennel and enriched with parmesan "bones" — the nutty rinds from Parmigiano-Reggiano. When ordered, the kitchen spikes it with linguica, chile flakes and a big handful of assorted seafood, including nickel-sized manila clams and plump Oregon bay shrimp on our visit. The result, again, is refined and rustic: The broth has a creamy mouthfeel, but the heat is wicked.

A Grilled Double Cut Pork Chop (\$23) finds its edge with a side of "tomato compote" — roasted Romas stuffed with smoky poblanos and flecked with mustard seed. Yukon Golds are thickly mashed with olive oil and ringed by slow-cooked cipollini onions.

Whereas the Niman Ranch hamburger (lunch \$10, dinner \$12) at dinner was merely good, the Hot Pastrami at a later lunch visit (\$9) was transcendent. Both sandwiches are served on a Rustic Baguette by La Farine (the bakery is just three doors down). The free-form loaf is soft enough to keep from cutting the corners of your mouth, and hardy enough to handle the juice. But it's the pastrami — utterly tender with an assertive smoke — that makes the sandwich. It delivers more flavor

than most versions piled three times as high. A crisp-and-spicy cabbage slaw serves to clean the palate and dissolve any guilt (although those thin-cut fries with the burger are awfully good).

I also like how DiMare handles pasta, especially in the context of a tavern. Using slow-braised meat as a base, he adds dimension with citrus — in this case, an orange gremolata with pork (\$16). The zest is barely perceptible, but enough to harmonize the fruity notes of hand-cut Roma tomato fillets with the rich stew.

DiMare's girlfriend is a pastry chef and a vegetarian, qualities that have helped him professionally. Granola gourmets will be happy to find Grains and Greens (\$13) on the dinner menu. And the sweets here are great — especially for a kitchen lacking its own pastry chef.

As lovely as the food can be, however, it might benefit from a step toward rustic — a style I think "Wood Tavern" evokes. You could change the name again, I suppose. "Gastropub," an English term signifying a pub with great food, has been banded about, Rebekah says, but she says that puts too much emphasis on the bar. Besides, Wood Gastropub just doesn't sing.

What's significant is that we all seem to be groping for a word that reflects our evolution from "cafe" to "bistro" and beyond. As restaurants become an increasingly soulful part of modern life, we want to honor this connection. "Pub" is instructive, as it connotes the friendly, open-all-day neighborhood connection that is Wood Tavern, but its English association distracts from our keep-it-local West Coast sensibilities.

So Tavern it is. If Gramercy Tavern, the incredibly popular, upscale restaurant in New York City can get away with it, certainly the Woods can.

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