

ROBIN KLEVEN DISHON

Urban Solace

location > 3823 30th Street, North Park

phone > 619-295-6464

chef > Matt Gordon

web site > urbansolace.net

WHO DOESN'T HAVE A SOFT SPOT for comfort food? Depending on your upbringing, it might be your mother's homemade Hungarian goulash, or the Kraft macaroni and cheese in a box that sustained you in college. It could be a bowl of steaming pho from a street vendor, or a Gruyère-topped crock of *soupe a l'oignon* prepared by Grandmere.

One thing's for certain: Trends in dining come and go, but food for the soul will always be in demand. So, we hope, will North Park's new eatery, Urban Solace.

Sophisticated and grown-up, yet unpretentious, Urban Solace embraces the comfort concept like a big group hug, feeding an eclectic clientele at prices as friendly as the service. Nothing on the menu tops \$16; wines by the glass are all under \$9. "You can't serve entrées for \$16 and then have wine at \$18 a glass," reasons co-owner Scott Watkins, who founded Urban Solace with chef/co-owner Matt Gordon.

Starters are even more reasonable. The best of this affordable and likable bunch is a roasty-toasty tomato-fennel soup topped with smoked-pepper crème fraîche, just \$2.50 for a filling cup. Delicate sweet-potato fries, perfect for sharing with friends and swizzling in buttermilk sauce, go for \$5. And that old Hollywood standard, cobb salad (\$7 for a generous "small" serving), is loaded with enough bacon strips, avocado and morsels of chicken and blue cheese to make it a real meal.

Want to take a dip? Check out the roasted, cumin-spiced butternut squash starring in a rustic warm purée sharpened by tangy goat cheese and served with spicy cornbread crisps (\$6).

But don't spoil your dinner, as Mom would say. It's the entrées, a deceptively simple collection of dishes prepared with verve, that make Urban Solace special.

TAKE THE VEGGIE POT PIE (\$10.50), a combo of caramelized root vegetables, onions and cream contained in a crust made from fennel pollen, minced fennel and oodles of butter. Even without the toothsome filling, the pastry would be a knockout. Chef Gordon makes it from scratch, as he does just about everything from this labor-intensive kitchen.

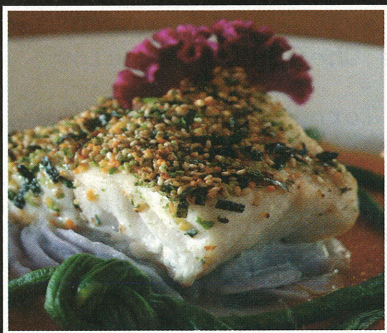


Top: Cider and molasses-glazed free-range half-chicken.

Bottom: Roasted veggie pot pie.

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REVIEW

Rather than simply roasting chicken, he brines whole free-range Jidori birds for 24 hours first, a process that ensures remarkable moistness. The finished half-bird, fragrant with herbs and partnered with a simple potato gratin, is topnotch (\$14.50).

The sizable pork chop (\$15.25) is brined as well, with cinnamon added to the liquid for flavor. While the pork turns out well enough, it's the accompanying reduction of shallots—offering a drier, more elegant flavor than caramelized onions—and boldly seasoned chard that steal the show.

baked apple, vanilla ice cream and French toast lighter than dandelion fluff.

The wine list, while short, offers some head-turning red blends. An artful blend of Rhône grapes from Minassian-Young in Paso Robles is outstanding at \$8.75, as is Napa's Bangin' Red, a Bordeaux-style cuvée with a splash of Zinfandel for just \$6.25. Frei Brothers' ripe-fruit Chardonnay goes for \$6.50 a glass; Zaca Mesa's more elegant Viognier is \$8.25.

Friday and Saturday, the kitchen serves till 11 p.m., with the bar open until midnight.



Monte Diego sandwich

BREVIN BLACH

Pan-roasted fish, served as a special for \$15.75, changes nightly. We'd gladly return for the hefty portion of Arctic char, lightly coated in fresh herbs and roasted on the skin to add flavor to the mild pink flesh. On the side, couscous dotted with crunchy red pepper offered a clever touch of texture.

Side dishes include the potato gratin (\$3.50), mild cheese-infused biscuits (\$1.25 apiece) or a creamy macaroni and cheese with bacon (\$6.50) that's almost too rich.

We figured only an Atkins Diet-addled diner would order something called "black cherry soda roasted apple, French toast and black cherry caramel" (\$6). Though it sounds like a train wreck, it tastes like a dream. Inspired by a dessert from Watkins' grandma, it delivers surprisingly suave cherry and caramel flavors complementing a perfectly

Coming in before 6:30 is one way to avoid a lengthy wait (reservations aren't accepted); others include dining at the bar, separated by a low wall from the dining room, or on the heated patio. The patio, by the way, hosts a bluegrass brunch on Sundays.

Clean, bold lines, contemporary paintings and high ceilings showcase a convivial crowd from the booming North Park neighborhood and beyond. The place buzzes with conversation and bursts with personality.

Service isn't the smoothest. We had to request water and silverware throughout the meal. But the sincere staff is eager to please. And the restaurant lives up to its name.

Urban Solace serves lunch Monday through Saturday, dinner nightly and brunch on Sunday at 3823 30th Street in North Park, 619-295-6464; urbansolace.net. ■



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