

The Smoking Goat

BY ROBIN KLEVEN DISHON



The Smoking Goat is neither a British pub nor a purveyor of legal weed, though recent visits left us rather giddy with pleasure. Rather, it's a knockout little bistro that could hold its own anywhere from San Francisco or New York to Le Marais — but happens to be in our own North Park.

Much has been made of the restaurant renaissance in this blossoming neighborhood, where residents enjoy a bounty of culinary riches within easy walking distance. In particular, the intersection of 30th and Upas boasts a number of new eateries that contrast sharply with the local Jack in the Box.

In this restaurant-rich quarter, The Smoking Goat opened with a whimsical name that almost had us expecting barbecued ribs and hookah pipes. Instead, we found a Le Cordon Bleu – trained chef riffing skillfully on California, French and comfort cuisine in a tiny space that's both rustic and urbane. The Smoking Goat may be the smallest new kid on the block, but it's big news for foodies.

Chef-owner Fred Piehl's local cooking credits include stints at Avenue 5 and La Jolla's Nine-Ten. For his venture into ownership, this casual dining room that seats fewer than 30 and turns tables a few times a night is ideal.

"Since this is my first restaurant, I didn't want to jump into a huge space," he says. "The advantage here is we don't have to serve a lot of people at once, so we're preparing things as we go."

That spontaneity is epitomized by the menu, which changes weekly as a collaboration between Piehl and chefs Mike Ryan and Ryan Grasley. Using hormone-free meats and poultry, along with an enticing spectrum of veggies, Piehl

blends his classical training with down-to-earth bistro sensibilities. There's butcher paper on the tables and Mick Jagger on the soundtrack. Life is good. It's even better as the food starts arriving. Mac 'n' cheese shares billing with celeriac remoulade. An all-American burger shows up on a French brioche bun. House-cut French fries are finished in a blend of duck fat and peanut oil and then seasoned with truffle oil.

More kudos to the team for embracing the sheer variety of produce on the market. Piehl not only serves a fine crab cake (\$10), he surrounds it with that celeriac remoulade and a festive chopped salad starring avocados, oranges and onions. He augments the spinach salad (\$8) with grilled asparagus and sweet onions, then echoes those outdoorsy flavors with lots of pancetta and a fluffy goat-cheese croquette.

House-made gnocchi (\$12) came with fat fava beans and fresh ramps (wild leeks), a seasonal delicacy from the Appalachians with a distinctive green-garlic character. (I wish ramps were in season longer than March through May — but then, part of the joy of seasonal cuisine is longing for the produce that's no longer in season, rather than trying to get it year-round.)

Finally, there's the stoemp — not the Broadway show but rather the traditional root-vegetable side dish from Belgium. Think smashed potatoes with turnips, carrots and a touch of cream, with French quatre épices for hints of nutmeg and clove.

Meat lovers, you're not forgotten. The pork rib chop (\$20) comes from a whole rib roast that's brined overnight, slow roasted, then sliced and finished on the grill *à la minute*. Cognac 'n' cream – sauced shiitakes and portobellos made a suitable crown. We prefer pork pinker for the ultimate in texture; this one was tender enough to pass muster.

The duo of duck (\$22) paired rare breast meat with a crisp-skinned, exceptionally flavorful thigh. We'd order this again, as well as the memorable Delmonico steak (at \$25, the priciest entrée). This boneless rib-eye cut tends to be heavily marbled, the key to its unparalleled flavor. This one, served blood-rare as ordered, was no different — it even had a big chunk of untrimmed fat running along the edge — but OMG, it was good.

To compensate for that artery-clogging diversion, we also sampled pan-seared halibut in a divine tarragon butter (\$20). It was light and delightful, and our cardiologist would approve.

So we ordered dessert — a combo of grilled banana bread (a house specialty), ice cream and a deep golden caramel sauce (\$7) — and now we're obsessing about that.

The coolly understated interior (by Bells & Whistles, the design firm behind Starlite Lounge and UCSD's Loft) features funky artwork, charcoal walls and wire-basket lighting straight out of a chic barn. An image of the restaurant's

namesake overlooks the crowd. Though deep and narrow, the room offers decent conversational acoustics; you'll be able to hear your companions as well as the friendly, informal wait staff.

Currently, only a handful of wines and a few beers are offered. Good buys by the glass include a fruity Vermentino (\$8) and an easy-drinking Gamay (\$7). Piehl promises to expand the beverage list over the summer.

"I don't want people to think this is a fine-dining experience," says Piehl. "It's a casual restaurant that serves good food — imaginative and well-prepared yet unpretentious."

We couldn't have put it better.

The Smoking Goat serves dinner Tuesday-Sunday at 3408 30th Street, North Park, 619-955-5295, thesmokinggoatrestaurant.com.