

SD READER

STORIES MISSION VALLEY | RESTAURANT REVIEW

American Revolutionary

By Naomi Wise | Published Wednesday, Nov. 4, 2009

All American Grill

7510 Hazard Center Drive, San Diego, 619-296-9600

Food can be a deeply political issue, but in this case it's the merely skin-deep question of the restaurant's name that's bugging me. (Didn't Shakespeare say, "A grill by any other name would smell as yummy"? I'm writing 100 times on the blackboard: "Do not judge a restaurant by its title.") The phrase "all American" ought to imply a roster of the country's top athletes, but the badge of patriotism has been flaunted by politicians turning "all American" into code for "If you're against me, you hate your country." When I was a little kid, drunken demagogue Joe McCarthy accused President Eisenhower and the U.S. Army of being "pinkos." Plenty more of that on your TV and radio. That sort of patriotism hurts.

But, okay — change, hope, all that, the world's most beautiful Bill of Rights and Constitution and amazing scenery sea to shining sea, and We the People just won the Nobel for voting with poet Maya Angelou's cogent prayer: "Let America be America again." So, let's go, chef Timothy Au — let's see what you can do with your American ingredients out on your all-American wood-fired range!

I loved Au's work at Molly's at the downtown Marriott (before the restaurant was replaced by the more profitable celeb-chef chain Roy's). Finding Tim "Au-some" at the stove again was a kick (although his name's actually pronounced more like "ow"). A Chinese-American chef trained in French culinary technique — that's a union of the greatest cuisines on the globe. Nearly three years later, I still cherish the memories. I hope that eventually he'll put his vibrant ceviche on the menu here, call it by its all-American Hawaiian name, ahi poke.

There are two ideas behind this restaurant. One is to use in-season, American-grown and -crafted ingredients to the max, local-sourced when possible. The other is, in a former Trophy's space, to create a revolutionary new phenomenon — would you believe a sports pub with seriously good food?

Much of the giant, suburb-shiny space is filled with tight four-top booths (better fitted to gymnasts than to linebackers or channel-surfers), presided over on high by numerous muted TVs tuned to sports — of course. (On Sunday game-days, the sound is turned on.) A patio out back offers al fresco dining, but that night's weather was too brisk to consider it. A remarkably inclusive variety of fellow diners included old couples, old singles, collegian daters, young families with babies on board — every race, age, type, size, all of today's Americans. And nearly all seemed to share a benign good mood the evening I ate there — the new food was evidently working its magic.

The first task of owner Mark Oliver and chef Au, in both the kitchen and dining room, was to retrain a staff largely inherited from Trophy's. Our delightful waitress was a new hire, but she'd eaten at Trophy's before the handover. "The turnaround in the food is amazing," she said. Those kitchen and service staffers who couldn't or wouldn't convert to the new regime of quality were being replaced, she confided. The process is ongoing, so this review may be a trifle premature, but after waiting years for Au to resurface, I was chomping at the bit.

The specialty cocktails are creative but affordable, about the same price as a glass of ordinary wine, and they're mainly made with American booze, good liqueurs, and fresh fruit juices, rather than cheap bar mixes or "simple syrup" (sugar-water). You can instantly perceive the difference in the "All American Margarita," which is bright, lively, with just-right tartness from fresh lime and Triple Sec orange-peel liqueur. There was no hint of the bland high-fructose corn syrup sweetness of the carb-loaded big-brand mixes. Lynne's sprightly Pomegranate Lemonade (citrus vodka, fresh pom juice, fresh-squeezed lemon, etc.) was a hit, too. Ben's Bloody Mary, which comes Midwest-style with a beer back, was vibrant and spicy. (Designated driver Mark was the sole taster of his iced tea, so I can't comment on its gourmet qualities.)

The menu is flexible, with dishes of every size for every preference and price. It evokes a lower-caste version of the bill of fare at the jam-packed new Cucina Urbana. (As we were nibbling a great pizza at AA, the Lynvester boiled over about the impossibility of getting into CU anymore. The voice-mail reservation line is nearly always too full for more messages, and you could starve waiting for an unreserved chair at the bar or the communal table.) Neither the food nor the atmosphere is as flamboyantly hip and "sceney" as CU, but the chef's concepts are slyly sophisticated, and the space is an easygoing, affordable potential hangout if you're not measuring your hipness quotient by the restaurant's decor.

The first thing I noticed about the menu was that numerous seasonal dishes (e.g., those involving fresh corn) listed on the website menu were absent from the printed bill of fare — evidently Au is taking seasonality seriously. The killer starter, which can serve as an entrée, was a dinner plate-sized wood-oven-roasted individual pizza with a light, puffy crust. Our unsauced “Wine Country” version was topped with mild, lush goat cheese, a generous count of thick prosciutto slices, fresh black Mission figs and seedless red grapes, and (strewn on after heating) a heap of crisp arugula. Ben doesn’t love goat cheese, Mark doesn’t love figs, I’m not mad for red grapes, and all of us went ape for this exhilarating combination on a craftsmanly crust.

A substantial heap of Carlsbad mussels, local and hence ultra-fresh, were quick-roasted (not steamed), turning their shells dark and crackly and permeating their meats with the flavor of the garlic butter in the bottom of the roasting dish. “So-o-o good,” said Lynne, “but I wish there were some bread to soak up that slick of sauce underneath.” “Yeah, garlic bread!” said one of the guys. (You get no table bread.) Well, per the menu, Parmesan garlic bread is supposed to come with this dish — somehow omitted. (Yup, staff needs more training.) It was a treat, even so, generous enough to make an entrée for a singleton. In fact, a shared pizza and the mussels (or another starter) and a small salad or a six-buck dessert would furnish a substantial and delicious dinner for two for under \$30 (plus drinks, tip, etc.).

A retro iceberg lettuce wedge salad (back in fashion) was disappointing. It had raw red-onion slivers, cherry tomatoes, bleu cheese, and a soi-disant truffle vinaigrette. Truffle? Where? And no bacon, either. The only point to wedge salad is bacon. From now on, if I get the craving, I’ll make my own.

“Daddy Warbucks” is the menu’s name for Oysters Rockefeller. The big, tender whole bivalves did have bacon — which plays no part in the traditional recipe — along with Parmesan-dusted panko crumbs, spinach, and tomato (which all of us found too acidic and alien to the dish). We loved the oysters’ tenderness, the lightness of the panko topping — but found that topping too dry. Where’s the goop? (And where’s the Herbsaint?) The original fin de siècle invention of Jean Alciatore of NOLA’s Antoine’s Restaurant (using Pernod from France, since Louisiana’s homegrown Herbsaint wasn’t invented yet) didn’t include such frequent modern elaborations as mornaise or Hollandaise sauce. But at Antoine’s, the greens (minced parsley, scallions, chervil, and other fresh herbs rather than spinach) included an unconscionable amount of butter, enough to turn the minced veggies into a rich sauce. With Rockefeller, skinny won’t do: that’s why it’s called “Rockefeller” — not just for the green of that rich guy’s money but for the wealth of

dairy fat. A little more butter or a shot of cream (and hold the tomatoes) and this might make it. You don't need bacon, but really, ya gotta have goop.

By now, we'd finished our cocktails and were sipping a Central Coast Rousanne named "Writer's Block" (my chronic ailment). It had a beautiful label but was too sweet for our palates and needed more chilling — you want to drink this seriously cold. Although Rousanne is a close relative of Viognier, a better choice might have been the more familiar, dry-but-fruity Iron Horse Viognier from Monterey. For our entrées, a leap of faith toward Jade Mountain Syrah from Lake County brought a bold, complex, mouth-filling red more reminiscent of Syrah-rich Hermitage than generic Rhones or their California imitators. Mark, perpetual designated driver for this posse squadron, drinks sparingly and only when the wine tastes great and complements the food; he thoroughly enjoyed this bottling, which compensated his palate for maintaining its virginity until then.

Forging ahead into entrées, cheapest but least was a buffalo burger with the standard trimmings, ordered rare, accompanied by fine house-made potato chips. Bison is lean, like most game meats (except bear, beaver, manitou, and nutria). With less fat than chicken breast (and no trichina spores to kill as in wild boar or bear meat), it's gotta be really rare when cooked on dry heat or it dries out. And it did. Alternatively, the beefburgers here are 100 percent Certified Black Angus — not generic supermarket Angus but a pedigreed breed equivalent to USDA Top Choice. It can't get that designation if it's mixed with anonymous junk meats, so it'd likely be safe at medium-rare, and I'd even trust it fully rare, if the burgermeister can learn to handle that.

"Down Home" barbecued baby back ribs aren't really "Q" because they haven't been smoked. They've evidently been moist-cooked (braised) and then swathed with a sweet whiskey BBQ sauce and caramelized in the wood-burning oven. They're tender and tasty and come with slim, crisp "American Fries" and assorted roasted vegetables, some still too firm. (Hey, chef Tim: yams are in season now. How about yam fries with this?)

"Mississippi Sound" offers sweet, tender Gulf shrimp served over spaghettini in a variation of Neapolitan pasta puttanesca, with garlic, capers, Kalamata olives, sun-dried tomatoes, and a touch of chili. "It's okay, but I think it might be better in cream sauce," said Mark. "Everything's better in cream sauce," said Ben.

So, excuse me a minute while I whisper another suggestion into the ear of a chef whose talent I obviously respect. Puttanesca, folklorically, was quick-cooked on braziers on the streets of Naples by ladies of the evening — hence its name, "whore-

style.” You rarely find it in American Italian restaurants; I’ve never encountered it in Louisiana. I don’t think it flatters shrimps of this quality, but they’d sparkle like gems in a real NOLA-style spicy Creole cream sauce over pasta — an incredibly easy, luscious restaurant entrée. (See my favorite version of the recipe below this column on the website. My friend, chef Stanley Jackson, formerly of Commander’s Palace, made it at the fabulous but short-lived Lombard’s Creole Restaurant in Oakland. I volunteered as kitchen-flunky for the grand opening; in exchange, he gave me the recipe to publish at will.)

A dish called “Chinatown” offers Asian-style marinated skirt steak over spinach with a couple of huge onion rings. “I love the subtlety of this marinade,” said Mark. “I was afraid it would be heavy with soy, like teriyaki.” “Hey, chef’s Chinese, not Japanese,” I reminded him. “I love Japanese food, too, but Chinese is every New Yorker’s down-home comfort food.” (Nonetheless, I think the skirt steak could use some pounding to tenderize it.) “Taste these terrific onion rings!” said Lynne, a skinny lover of things fried. The puffy rounds were coated with a light batter shot through with assertive spices that none of us could pin down.

We couldn’t possibly have eaten dessert. And so we ate two, with not a crumb left over to take home for breakfast. A tangy buttermilk panna cotta (a sort of gelatin-custard) was delicious, if too firm and bouncy, compared to the greatest trembly versions; alongside came a supernumerary fried donut hole mini-pastry. Even better was dulce de leche cheesecake. “Pure New York,” said Ben, world-traveling airline stew. “Dense and rich, like at Junior’s.” Our waitress recommended the “San Diego,” a Snickers-Oreo ice cream pie, evidently a treat for those who love their sweets really sweet. (Maybe next time. Maybe never.) My espresso, however, was mediocre and served lukewarm.

“This is a great new idea,” said Lynne. “Sports pubs usually have awful food.” “Ever eat at Seau’s?” I asked her, citing the local ultimate of the genre. “Yeah. Yuck,” she answered. “But this place just changes the whole equation.” An even nicer shock was our modest bill. “Omigod, that’s all?” I squealed, considering the sub-\$200 tab for three cocktails, two serious wines, and ten dishes (of which even the worst were better than anything Trophy’s ever dreamed of). And all in an ambiance where whatever you’re already wearing is good enough, and in a space so capacious you probably don’t even have to reserve, except on serious football days. At long last, we have a place that both Tin Forkers and Swedish-Stainless Spooners can enjoy equally. I guess that’s what “All American” means.

Erratum: The surname of Grant Grill’s chef de cuisine is spelled Kurth.

All American Grill

*** (Very Good)

7510 Hazard Center Drive, Mission Valley, 610-296-9600, aagrill.com.

HOURS: Daily, 11:00 a.m.–9:30 p.m. (sometimes later).

PRICES: Soups, salads, appetizers, \$3.75–\$12; entrée salads, \$10.50–\$13; individual pizzas, \$10–\$11.50; burgers, \$9.50–\$12; entrées, \$12.50–\$26; sides, \$3.50–\$6; desserts, \$6.

CUISINE AND BEVERAGES: Fresh, foodie-worthy pub grub from a wood-fired oven and grill, highlighting American ingredients. Affordable made-from-scratch creative cocktails; California wines, numerous choices by the glass.

PICK HITS: Appetizers/grazes: fig, prosciutto, and goat-cheese pizza; roasted Carlsbad mussels. Entrées: “BBQ” baby back ribs, Asian skirt steak. Desserts: cheesecake, panna cotta. Good bets: baked portobello, bison meat loaf, “Texan” steak (bacon-wrapped filet with blue cheese).

NEED TO KNOW: Former Trophy’s location with family-friendly sports-bar atmosphere and prices; if you’re mainly going for the food, avoid “football Sundays” when TV sound is on. Patio dining. Plenty of lacto-vegetarian and “kiddie-appeal” dishes. Happy hour 4:00–7:00 p.m. Monday–Friday in lounge or on patio, deep discounts on grazes, drinks, house wines.