

Kitchen Door, Napa: Fine dining, fast-food style

Michael Bauer

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Some chefs have trouble adjusting to the trends, but Todd Humphries has adapted admirably. He excelled in fine dining - he was the chef of Campton Place - and then opened Martini House in St. Helena with Pat Kuleto, a more casual but still highly refined venue for his craft.

After a nine-year run, Martini House closed. But Humphries' next act fits right into the eat-and-run ADD culture bred by the Internet. It's a semi-self-serve restaurant named Kitchen Door, located in the now-popular Oxbow Market in Napa.

Seemingly without a second thought, Humphries has gone from linen tablecloths to numbered flags that diners pick up at the order counter. His food, executed by Christopher Litts, is exceptional, whether it's a shaved celery salad (\$7) bathed in a fresh and creamy white balsamic vinaigrette with blue cheese, dates and candied pecans; or a puffy wood-fired pizza (\$14) with smoked salmon, creme fraiche, capers and fennel.

Humphries and Litts have created an eclectic menu of homey food from around the world - a perfectly cooked chicken dinner (\$14.50) with a bronzed half chicken nested on a bed of peas, carrots and roasted potatoes; duck banh mi (\$13.25), a duded-up version of the classic Vietnamese sandwich with pickled vegetables, spicy mayonnaise, toasted soft roll and a side of sweet potato fries; and Armenian lahmajune (\$14.50), a round flatbread smeared with spiced ground lamb and topped with greens, cucumbers, tomatoes, yogurt and harissa.

Most dishes winners

Trying to do such disparate dishes as Korean short ribs with a soy glaze on bacon-scented fried rice (\$14), a classic duck liver mousse with herbed flat bread (\$5.95), and mushroom fettuccine in a Parmesan cream sauce (\$13.25) could be a disaster. Instead, most dishes turn out to be winners, and even the most straightforward ones have a twist.

Most restaurants serve salmon fillets, but here diners get a salmon steak (\$19.95), bones and all, perched

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on a pile of sweet corn moistened with chipotle lime butter.

The hamburger (\$13.95) is also one of the best around - a half-pound patty of Kobe beef, fat and juicy and layered into a soft bun with wine-stewed onions and glazed with Swiss cheese and a "secret sauce" that's not too far off from Thousand Island dressing. It comes together spectacularly, and the fries alongside do the burger proud, too - thin and crisp, with a fresh potato taste.

Located off the main Oxbow hall, the restaurant is a large barn-like structure that seats 100. Along the back wall is the open kitchen where you can see the cooks perspiring over the grill as they stand next to the rotisserie, nearly always filled with paprika-cloaked chickens turning on the spit.

Diners can sit at the bar, which is faced with weathered riddling racks. A long marble communal table visually divides the room in two, with various-size tables on both sides.

The entire space, with a corrugated metal roof and concrete floor, looks a little temporary and cold, although the collection of bright plates and jars of pickled vegetables along one wall help to warm things up. A large patio in back is shared with neighboring businesses, including Hog Island Oyster Co., Oxbow Wine Merchant and Wine Bar, and Ca' Momi.

Order at the counter

Kitchen Door's counter ordering process might prove to be its Achilles heel. People don't mind ordering and picking up a taco at C Casa or an arepa at Pica Pica, but the more extensive offerings at Kitchen Door put diners in the mood for a more leisurely, multicourse meal.

If you place the entire order at the counter, everything will arrive at once, but there's a way around the system. If you want appetizers and main courses, order just the first courses and wine, close out the check, then get flatware and water and find your seat. Once you're settled, you don't have to get up again. The waiters are efficient, and when they bring the first round, you can order the main course or whatever else you want. They replace flatware, remove plates and bring new ones just like at a full-service restaurant. So you end up signing your name twice to the credit card, which is slightly annoying, but at least you don't have to jump up and down like a jack-in-the-box.

Desserts shouldn't be ignored, either - especially the Straus soft-serve ice cream sundae (\$4 plus \$1 for the sauce and 50 cents for each topping); churros (\$5) with a crispy sugar-dusted exterior, custard-like center and a spicy chocolate sauce and dulce de leche; and candy cap mushroom bread pudding (\$6.95) reminiscent of Humphries' all-mushroom menu at Martini House. It's one of the best bread puddings I've tasted, with a rich creaminess and a haunting hint of earthiness balanced by just the right amount of sugar.

Still, I fear some impatient diners might not get that far because the ordering process encourages people to order one item and move on. Yet with the talent at the stove, Kitchen Door feels like a full-service

restaurant. It's just disguised in a fast-food format.

Kitchen door

610 First St., Suite 24 (in Oxbow Market), Napa

(707) 226-1560 or www.kitchendoornapa.com

Lunch and dinner 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Monday-Friday, brunch and dinner 9 a.m.-9 p.m. Saturday-Sunday. Beer and wine. No reservations. Credit cards accepted.

Overall: Rating: TWO STARS 1/2

Food: Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS

Service: Rating: ONE AND A HALF STARS

Atmosphere: Rating: TWO STARS

Prices: \$\$ (Most main courses less than \$17)

Noise rating: Noise Rating: THREE BELLS Talking normally gets difficult (70-75 decibels)

Rating: FOUR STARS Extraordinary Rating: THREE STARS Excellent Rating: TWO STARS Good Rating: ONE STAR Fair Noise Rating: BOMB Poor

The wine list

The easy-breezy service format of the Kitchen Door is reinforced in the beverage selections - eight wines on tap and 20 in the bottle, along with four draft beers and 10 bottles.

Where the restaurant excels is in the selection. It's a list that's well thought out by Tim Seberson, who is able to get the 2010 Miner Viognier on tap (\$8 a glass/\$15 half liter) as well as the 2009 Calera [Central Coast](#) Pinot Noir (\$11/\$23).

For beer, the on-tap selections (all \$5.50) are exclusively regional: Napa Smith Pilsner, Lagunitas IPA, Anderson Valley Boont Amber Ale and Sudwerk Hefewiezen.

In the bottled wines - all are offered by the glass, half liter and bottle - Seberson doesn't adhere to regionalism, so while you get the 2010 Seghesio Arneis (\$10/\$21/\$35), you can also find the 2009 Laurenz V Gruner Veltliner (\$9/\$19/\$31) and the 2009 Figaro Tinto Garnacha (\$7/\$15/\$24) and 2009 Straightline Tempranillo (\$11/\$23/\$38).

Markups are reasonable, but what's even better is there's no corkage. Instead, as the menu says, "Give the

chef a taste."

You can buy a great wine from the Oxbow Wine Merchant just outside the door, or bring a special bottle you might have picked up on your Napa Valley wine-tasting tour. If you don't like stemless glassware, you might want to bring your own glasses, too.

Michael Bauer is The Chronicle's restaurant critic. E-mail him at mbauer@sfgate.com, and go to sfgate.com/food to read his previous reviews. Find his blog daily at insidescoopsf.com, and follow him on Twitter at [@michaelbauer1](https://twitter.com/michaelbauer1).

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