



Good Grub

Giddyup on over to cowboy-heavenly Roxy

By Elaine Smith

“A good cowgirl never has her back to the door,” my grandpa always told me, but I broke this rule so I could look at the painting of Roxy, the beguiling if improbable cowgirl on the wall at Roxy Restaurant & Bar on Fair Oaks Boulevard. Improbable is right when you look at the place, which is full of contrast. Elegant, curving banquettes are covered in hairy cowhide, while high-backed chairs are upholstered in a rich brown microsuede. A big, antique-looking carved wooden bar on one side is lit by ultramodern fixtures. In the middle of the very large and noisy room is a sleek open view to the stainless-steel kitchen, lit by a massive, tinkly crystal chandelier. Servers wear brown western shirts, with crystal embellishments for the ladies, and the hostess wears a sparkly black cocktail dress that looks way more prom night than prairie honky tonk.

Suddenly it all clicked when I saw the flatware on the table: oversized stainless knives and forks with the imprint “RL.” Yes! Ralph Lauren. This place is the second cousin once removed of Ralph Lauren, the nice Jewish boy who changed his name and made his fame marketing American icons—WASPs and Westerns—to the upper-middle class. We may not own a yacht or a ranch in Wyoming, but we like to look the part. And that’s perfect for the crowd that’s assembled here: baby boomers taking their aged



Fancy western décor greets you at Roxy

parents or young adult children to dinner, business lunchers, residents of Carmichael and the Arden area escaping boring chain restaurants. The clientele is homogenous: My friend and I blended right in with the lunch crowd, both of us in our cashmere hoodies, dressy jeans and boots.

Ralph Lauren was smart to mine the west for inspiration. Images of cowboys and ranch life from the Wild West are integral to American culture: films, books, fashion fads, even cowboy poetry. But cowpoke food usually means anything that can be cooked in an iron pot over a fire by a guy named Cookie, who’s not picked

for his culinary CV but because he’s too old or lame to ride the range. So I was curious to see what Roxy owners Ron and Terry Gilliland, who also run Midtown success Lucca, would rustle up for grub.

This American bistro menu consists of comfort foods with modern touches.

Chili, for one, and cornbread, too. But these are anomalies on this American bistro menu, which consists of comfort foods with modern touches. Several dishes are recognizable from celebrity chef restaurants. Names and descriptions of dishes are peppered with the sources of ingredients, from Painted Hills beef to River Dog Farms organic produce. With the gourmet burgers, for example, you can get fries with that, or choose a colorful red quinoa side salad studded with pomegranates, apples and walnuts. Dude, we’re not on the range anymore.

The chili, by the way, already has a bit of a following. A fellow wine lover I know—a top surgeon and frequenter of trendy San Francisco restaurants—surprised me by mentioning the chili as his fave at Roxy.

Another popular item is the heirloom squash soup, rich with what

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seemed like equal parts heavy cream, bacon fat and squash puree and topped with cheese croutons. A couple of hot spoonfuls were quite warming on a chilly day.

A starter of chopped ahi in a sesame wafer cone was a supersized version of Hawaiian ahi poke in a cone made haute by Thomas Keller of French Laundry fame and popularized by PlumpJack restaurants' executive chef James Ormsby. Roxy's version was pared down to show off the glistening cubes of raw tuna. The sweetness of the cone was surprisingly welcome with the very light dressing and earthy fish. A simple, satisfying dish I'd get again, perhaps as lunch with a salad.

Four well-seasoned slabs of beef floated on a mound of fresh chopped salad.

Another small plate was recognizable from past dining sorties. The piquillo peppers stuffed with braised beef on a smoky purée was a paler, straightlaced twin to a heftier one I had a few months ago at Cyndi's Backstreet Kitchen in St. Helena. The braised meats at Roxy, whether pork or beef, are very simply prepared, either boringly bland or brilliantly elemental, depending on your taste. The braised pork, served on ravioli

stuffed with mashed potatoes, reminded me of a succession of light brown meals I ate while traveling through Eastern Europe in the 1980s, although these Roxy dumplings were cheekily arranged in three pretty mounds on a mod white platter.

Steak is big here, supplied by a ranch in Nebraska that the Gilliards have invested in. I loved my steak salad at lunch. Four well-seasoned slabs of beef floated on a mound of

very fresh chopped salad, with a piquant vinaigrette and a restrained drizzle of blue cheese sauce on the steak that didn't overwhelm.

Presentation at Roxy is playful and engaging. Sole is served swimming in a beurre blanc with almond slices, topped with a mountain of dressed frisée, a springy green. Spirals of shoestring red onion rings tangle on a salad in a joyful dog pile. And for dessert, a trio of three custards is topped with shards of spun sugar that catch the light in the same way as the caramel-colored glass tray they rest on.

The ice cream sundae, with fancy spun-sugar embellishments, will delight your inner child. Chocolate desserts, however, were inconsistent. The Dr. Pepper cupcake was dry and the frosting grainy, similar to my first attempt to make them for my daughter's 3rd birthday. The trio of chocolate desserts disappointed as well, despite the clever swath of chocolate painted on the white

rectangular platter, due to an overbaked tiny soufflé, a quenelle of gelato that quickly melted, and overly large spoons that would have been better suited to shoveling in beans after a hard day of rounding up dogies.

Service is quick and professional, almost to a fault. On a busy Saturday night, we were stunned at how fast we were ushered through our three-course meal. "Like castrating the young bulls at my dad's," I thought to myself. "Turn 'em and burn 'em."

My grandfather, who dressed up with his bolo tie and Stetson cowboy hat to take us out for Mexican food, simply wouldn't know where to begin with Roxy. But with its festive presentation, great service and fresh foodstuffs, Sacramentans will find the place a welcome stop on the (station)wagon trail.

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The sleek dining room of this American bistro is pleasing to the eye