

High-quality fare in a fun atmosphere

A few brand new restaurants get it right from the outset — the location, the menu, the look. Wood Tavern, which opened two months ago on College Avenue, is one. It was an instant hit. The neighborhood took immediately to this small, noisy, wood-trimmed bar and restaurant. Its owners, Rebekah and Rich Wood, who sold Frascati in San Francisco to move to Oakland, and chef Max DiMare rose to the challenge. They handled the onslaught so well that everyone who tried it at the beginning came back.

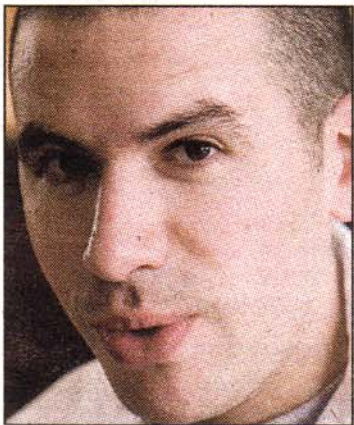
Granted, Wood Tavern's location in the former space of Grasshopper is a natural. Part of a small neighborhood food complex with the world-class bakery La Farine, a butcher shop, a produce store, a wine shop and a confectioner; the restaurant stays open continuously from lunch right through until dinner. People sit at the wide, comfy, copper-topped bar or at wooden tables in an airy, high-ceilinged room. The kitchen is completely open to view and part of the action.

A small, versatile menu supports eating at all hours. You can drop in for a snack served on a "Butcher Block" (\$5 each), like a scoop of soft, savory rabbit rillettes served on a little wooden board with grilled bread, glazed onions and grainy mustard; or a cheese (\$4 each).

At lunch one day, I continued on with pork shoulder-garbanzo bean soup (\$7) heaped with tender, shredded meat dusted with grated parmesan. A spinach salad with jewel-like cubes of beets, hazelnuts and goat cheese (\$8) somehow tasted new and exciting. I drank a pretty Alsatian pinot blanc (\$8) by the glass — from many possible choices.

I liked lunch so much I returned for dinner a week later. Again, the food was fresh, lively, pretty and affordable. A deep bowl of chopped romaine tossed with hunks of grilled bread, dry cured olives, feta, garbanzos and cucumber (\$8), a turn on a Greek salad, was crunchy and satisfying.

In a more elaborate composition, tissue-thin slices of venison paved an oval plate, which was garnished with potato chips topped with meaty



Chef Max DiMare's hearty fare pairs with the artisan beers at Wood Tavern.

chopped eggplant (\$11). It needed just a tiny bit more salt, lemon and olive oil.

Main courses completely fulfilled. Wicked Good Seafood Stew (\$22) is not hyperbole. A big hunk of moist, satiny halibut sat on top of a tangle of clams, mussels, rock shrimp and many thin slices of hot, garlicky Portuguese sausage, the flavors of which enriched a spicy tomato broth.

A succulent pan roasted half chicken with a golden crust (\$18) got a delicious accompaniment of cauliflower florettes crunchy with bread crumbs.

Who wouldn't love a bowl of rigatoni dressed in a pungent lamb stew (\$18), dotted with green olives and dusted with parmesan? A grilled flat iron steak (\$23), medium rare and juicy, got mashed potatoes and a sexy drizzle of brown pine nut butter. Plenty of people were eating Niman hamburgers (\$10) with skinny fries.

The Woods call their place a "gastropub," essentially a neighborhood bar with an elevated food sensibility. The gastropub movement has transformed the London food scene, and one of the hottest restaurants in New York, The Spotted Pig, calls itself a gastropub.

Now we have our own in Wood Tavern, with its long list of tasty wines by the glass and bottle, artisan beers, a full bar, and seductively polished hearty fare.

The new edition of Patricia Unterman's San Francisco Food Lover's Pocket Guide is in bookstores now. Contact pattii@concentric.net.



Rigatoni with lamb stew, olives and parmesan is a highlight dish at Wood Tavern. — All: Jason Steinberg/Special to The Examiner

WOOD TAVERN

Location: 6317 College Ave., Oakland
Contact: (510) 654-6607
Hours: 11:30 a.m. to 9:45 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays; 11:30 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays; 11:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sundays
Price range: Firsts, \$7 to \$15; mains and sandwiches, \$9 to \$23
Recommended dishes: Rabbit rillettes, fish stew, pork and garbanzo soup, beet salad, rigatoni with lamb sugo, pan-roasted chicken
Credit cards: MasterCard, Visa, American Express
Reservations: Accepted