

Wood Tavern debuts on College Ave.

Casually smart new bistro makes splash

Restaurant review
by Robeerta Holly

Restaurants anchor in neighborhoods for a time and all too often, for various reasons, sail on. Asian-oriented Grasshopper, on the Oakland/Berkeley border, recently departed for ports unknown, and a new place, Wood Tavern, has docked in its place.

All indications are that the fresh arrival will serve up plenty of smiles.

It's the baby of husband-wife team, Rich and Rebekah Wood. They owned the Italian restaurant, Frascati, in San Francisco but, being Oakland residents, they wanted a place closer to home, so they sold Frascati and opened Wood Tavern, which just celebrated its two-month anniversary.

Their seasoned expertise is evident in every detail, from food to service to a warmly inviting décor that features light-colored hardwood floors, exposed brick, avocado-green walls, tables that are, happily, decently spaced, and a handsomely imposing, dark-wood bar. You can settle in for a glass of wine from a well-chosen list (our host recommended two winners: an Alsatian pinot blanc and a Central Coast syrah), for local beers on tap, or for cocktails, such as a "Tavern Bellini," an "Ultimate Martini," a "Boodles' Sling," or my favorite, a "Perfect Manhattan."

You can dine at the bar, too (the last time I visited, famed econo-



Staff photos

Wood Tavern is a popular new restaurant on College Avenue near Claremont in Berkeley.

mist, Robert Reich, was perched on one of its stools, so perhaps you can celebrity-watch, as well).

The warmly satisfying food is the creation of executive chef, Max Dimare, who worked at Frascati, though his menu is not conspicuously Italian. Recent starters (\$7 to \$13) included familiar but well-assembled bistro offerings, like



The interior of Wood Tavern features hardwood floors, dark wooden furniture, and soft lighting.

a rich black bean soup, seared ahi tuna with a parmesan vinaigrette, and three salads — a romaine, an arugula-asparagus, and a smoked salmon — though I'd recommend the offbeat: the crispy pork belly confit. The crackling-good salty-sweet pork was paired with a perfectly timed soft-boiled egg, yukon potatoes and spinach in a shallot-sherry vinaigrette. It ought to become a signature dish.

You can also begin your meal

with what the restaurant calls "Butcher Block" starters — salami, smoked duck breast or rabbit rillettes (\$5/each or \$14/all), or with a "Cheese Board" (\$4/each or \$14/all), that on a recent visit included French, Catalunya and Australian cows' milk cheeses, along with *fleur vert*, an herbed goat cheese.

There are choices for every taste — meat, poultry, seafood — among the 10 or so main courses (\$12 to \$23), along with a vegetarian selection, a mushroom couscous with zucchini, asparagus and artichoke salsa, for example. The grilled double cut pork chop with olive oil mashed potatoes and cipollini onions is a favorite of the house. Brined 24 hours, the pork sidesteps the tendency of this very lean meat to go dry. Dimare's version is tastily moist, and its accompanying tangy potatoes and onions make a hearty meal.

Another favorite, the seared maple leaf duck breast with hazelnut wild rice and broccolini, is equally moist and satisfying. Hanger steak, a seafood stew ("wicked good," the menu suggests), an Alaskan halibut and a pork linguini were on offer on a recent visit, as was a juicy Niman Ranch burger with fries, to which you can add cheese, bacon or avocado as you wish.

The short but tempting dessert list includes a creamily silken panna cotta and a richly molten warm chocolate cake.

Wood Tavern's relaxed but attentive service adds to its engagingly casual air, and though the lighting is discreet, you can see your food. Is there a downside? The place gets

pretty noisy when it's full, but the buzz is far from deafening, and an upside is that the only phone you'll hear is the restaurant's. Why? Fine print at the bottom of the menu warns that, "Cell phones in use will be cured for 6 weeks, sliced and serve with raclette."

It helps to have a sense of humor when you open a restaurant.

Joining neighbors, Yasai, Vino, La Farine and Ver Brugge in a very international corner of Oakland, Wood Tavern has dropped its anchor at 6317 College Avenue near the Berkeley border, serving lunch daily and dinner Monday-Saturday. For reservations call 654-6607.