

Grand Gestures

Wood Tavern packs big flavors to go with its masculine vibe.

By John Birdsall

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It's a small place with enormous buzz. Since early February, when Wood Tavern opened in the space that used to house Grasshopper, the restaurant has stoked the kind of curiosity that swirls around a particularly juicy Sunday open house. Curiosity hadn't dimmed six weeks later, when Doug Washington stood in the crowded space on the fringe of Rockridge, awaiting a table. The co-proprietor of the San Francisco restaurants Town Hall and Salt House squinted slightly at the bottles of liquor stacked up at the bar as if minutely studying the competition.

Washington has been rumored to have his eye on Oakland for eastward expansion. He could learn a lot from Wood Tavern, a place that expresses the spirit of its neighborhood with the prim, wood-trimmed outlines of a Craftsman house gone interior-designer mod. With a big-grained hickory floor and walls a light-to-dark gradient of forest-y green, it's a room wrapped in the woodsy semiotics of masculine comfort, shined up with a little varnish of urbanity.

So is the cooking, which piles up big tastes on plates with satisfying portions of skillfully cooked meats. Think of it as Zax Tavern without the slacks-and-dress-shirt vibe: a bit less polish but no less flavor.

Less polish can be a fine thing for a place with aspirations as a neighborhood hangout, so long as that neighborhood can handle entrées in the twenty-dollar range. Rebekah Wood says she and her husband, Rich, the owners, wanted a restaurant where locals could drop in for a burger and a Hefeweizen on a Saturday afternoon. And if there's one thing the Woods know, it's catering to a neighborhood.