

December 2016

FEAST

review

Fun HOUSE of CULINARY DELIGHTS

David Burke is back in a tavern of tricks.

By Gael Greene



STEP UP TO THE PLATE From left: Dishes at David Burke's Tavern 62 include modern American takes like (clockwise from top left) the Little Gem Salad, octopus carpaccio, the tuna poke and the Angry Lobster Scramble; the upstairs dining room features red leather banquettes and art from Burke's personal collection.



On the door it says Tavern 62 by David Burke. That tells us the prankster chef who lost his name in a dispute with his partners is in play again. He got his new collaborator to take back his old Fishtail digs, and he's spruced up the place with Hawaiian salt bricks glowing at the door, tufted leather banquettes, handsome new tiles on the parlor floor and paintings from his own collection.

Years pass and chefs mature, but there's no need to fret that Burke might grow stodgy. A few bruises and a lull between projects have just given him time to dream up new tricks. The man who conceived of the numbered swordfish chop and patented salmon pastrami sends out his first delicious new stunt in a silver toast holder

tonight. They are four thin disks of Boston brown bread with raisins and jalapeno toast baked in tin cans, served with red pepper jam and butter on a salt slab alongside.

The chef himself arrives with the next punch line: candied bacon dangling from a wood-and-string gallows, held on with clothespins. Housemade pickles counteract the sweetness. Yes, he's pleased with himself. We're giggling too. The bacon is fabulous. But so is the Angry Lobster Scramble—a large bowl of lobster and shrimp with chile heat, tucked into soft eggy mounds that we pile on croutons delivered standing up in the bowl. I'm not sure why it needs basil-colored creme fraiche, but it makes a pretty picture.

Cuts of little gem lettuce dressed with horseradish and buttermilk sit on rounds of sweet crimson beets with slabs of goat cheese and pistachio bits. A wonderful salad. Poke is the new octopus, so of course, there's a peppery

TAVERN 62
135 62nd St.
212.988.9021
tavern62.com

HOURS
Lunch, Mon.-Fri., 11:45AM-2:30PM; dinner, Sun.-Thurs., 5-10PM; Fri. & Sat., 5:30-10:30PM; Sun. brunch 11AM-4PM



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tuna poke with avocado rolled into cucumber thins and decorated with puffed quinoa sprinkles. That doesn’t eliminate octopus carpaccio as a starter too. I just didn’t have a chance to taste it in two dinners.

Friends who know my weakness for macaroni aren’t surprised when I order the \$18 side of Millionaire’s Mac and Cheese as my first course. It’s big enough, so I don’t mind sharing. Frankly, the macaroni and cheese concept is somewhat overwhelmed by the nouveau richness of lobster, shrimp and truffle.

The circumspect can order whole roasted branzino or ginger-black pepper salmon. And something green: broccolini and pearl onions, but probably not creamed spinach or caramelized Brussels sprouts with chestnuts and pancetta. (Too much like candy.)

Roasted sea scallops sitting on corned beef cheeks with cabbage and fried quail eggs is another invention that works. That is, only one of my three friends is offended. Duck Duck Duck, normally delivered for two at \$78, features many slices of rare duck breast and a luscious foie gras pastry “dumpling.” My companions had no problem persuading the captain to deliver a single portion. But I was recognized at the door and that can mean no one says no to any request at my table.

But I’d be back every once in a while anyway, just for the Peking pork shank. As with Peking duck, the gargantuan chunk of pig comes with a steamer of small Chinese crepes, a puddle of plum sauce and a side of shrimp and lap chong rice. Scrape away the fat for a layer of wildly crusty skin and savor the moist pork flesh underneath. Depending on appetites, it’s easily enough for two or three or four.

A young man-about-town who had lunch here opening day sent me a glowing review of the Tavern burger and the banana cream

pie. As soon as he said “pie,” I got a little obsessive about getting a date in my calendar. Purists may not kowtow to rock shrimp coleslaw on their burger—it is indeed sauce-y and drippy—but I liked the smoked cheddar and the unusual crisp bread excuse for a roll. Ask for an extra napkin.

I like the banana pie on its graham cracker crust more than the key lime pie and, even more, the apple jack-spiked apple pie for two (or three or four). It comes with a collection of add-ons—whipped cream, sour cream, chocolate. The first time I ordered it, the waiter went overboard, spilling on everything. I sent it back so we could go overboard on our own.

Burke says he is hoping the neighbors come to think of dropping in solo at the bar or coming for afternoon tea. Beef cheek Rueben and a salmon club sandwich on a muffin are tempting at lunch. There’s also a \$29 Blue Plate Special—soup, salad and a sandwich. When we last spoke, Burke announced he was starting to promote Sunday suppers for the table.

In the early days, the house had an annoying problem of losing guests. My friends were asked to wait till I arrived when I was already sitting upstairs piling red pepper jam on jalapeno country toast. Finally, one of them said, “She’s never late” and came upstairs to find me. Another friend waited 20 minutes downstairs and then stormed out thinking he’d been stood up, while his dinner date upstairs finally decided to eat alone. “We had to let a few people go,” Burke admits. “Waiters too. Good waiters will wait to see if a new place is getting business before they jump ship.” They’ve been jumping. ■

FARE GAME
From left:
Tavern 62’s
steak with
Thai fries; the
Angry Lobster
Scramble.

PHOTOS BY MIKEY POZARIK