

Dining Update: MacArthur Park back in the groove

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Wednesday, October 8, 2008

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Palo Alto's MacArthur Park has always been a distinctive restaurant, occupying a landmark 1918 building that originally served as a welcoming center for World War I servicemen and their families. In 1981, Spectrum Foods took it over and opened MacArthur Park, with a menu of smokehouse barbecue, and installed Faz Poursohi from Chicago as chef.

The menu, setting and location, at El Camino Real and University Avenue, just off the Stanford campus, made it a popular gathering place. But over the years, well after Poursohi left to open his own restaurants, the restaurant slid.

Earlier this year, Poursohi sold his Faz restaurant in San Francisco to Perry Butler (Butler plans to open in the Steuart Street space later this fall) and, with former Spectrum executive Chuck Frank, bought MacArthur Park from Spectrum.

Spruced-up space

The partners set about refurbishing the Julia Morgan (no relation to the writer) building, putting in new wood floors and carpeting, polishing up the wood paneling surrounding the imposing brick fireplaces, and generally sprucing up the place.

The two-story whitewashed room, with its crisscrossing beams, open mezzanines, attractive bar with deep leather couches, and spacious patio are inviting and welcoming. White-clothed tables and banquettes are roomy and comfortable.

In the kitchen, Poursohi has freshened up many of the MacArthur Park classics. The mound of onion strings (\$6) is crunchy and fun to eat. They're also featured on the combination appetizer platter (\$7 per person, to serve two or four), along with grilled baby artichokes (\$6 single order), crisp fried calamari (\$9 single order) and crescents of skin-on fried potatoes (\$8 single order) with lemon chive sour cream for dunking.

Another good way to start is with the MacArthur Park salad (\$7), wedges of baby iceberg lettuce, scattered with roasted cherry tomato halves, paper-thin red onion rings and too-few dices of smoked applewood bacon. It's drizzled with just enough house-made blue cheese dressing to bring it all together.

The signature barbecue meats come in several versions, but we were happy with the half slab of ribs and half chicken (\$22). Both meats were pleasantly smoky, with the ribs just stringy enough to pull off the bone, and the chicken plump and moist.

The barbecue sauce has a kick - as does the crunchy coleslaw that's served alongside. The platter is generous enough to almost guarantee leftovers, but leave the accompanying fries behind. On our visit, the skin-on potatoes looked great but seemed to have been sitting awhile before being served.

Beyond barbecue

There are plenty of other choices aside from barbecue, including a mesquite-grilled and smoked double-cut pork chop (\$24), four steaks (\$18-\$38), grilled prawns in the shell (\$22) and macaroni and cheese (\$10)

One of the most ambitious is a tender eight-rib marinated rack of lamb (\$28) garnished with baby artichoke halves and roasted cherry tomatoes, served with green beans and a very rich square of scalloped potatoes.

Desserts don't break new ground, but the always-popular turtle pie (\$8), with good-quality semisweet chocolate melted into a pecan crust over warm chocolate sauce, warrants kudos, and a New York cheesecake (\$7) is pleasant enough, although it would be better without the '80s-style pool of raspberry sauce.

Service was accommodating and informed, if not professionally crisp, with pacing good and servers checking back often. It made for an entire experience that was much improved from The Chronicle's last Update visit three years ago. There's new life in the old building - and that's a pleasure to see.

MacArthur Park

27 University Ave. (at El Camino Real), Palo Alto; (650) 321-9990 or macarthurparkpaloalto.com.

Lunch 11 a.m.-2 p.m. Monday-Friday; dinner 5-10 p.m. Monday-Saturday, until 9 p.m. Sunday; brunch 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Sunday (starting Oct. 12). Full bar. Reservations and credit cards accepted. Free parking lot.

Overall	Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS
Food	Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS
Service	Rating: TWO STARS
Atmosphere	Rating: THREE STARS
Prices	\$\$
Noise Rating	Noise Rating: THREE BELLS

RATINGS KEY

FOUR STARS = Extraordinary; THREE STARS = Excellent; TWO STARS = Good; ONE STAR = Fair; NO STARS = Poor

\$ = Inexpensive: entrees \$10 and under; \$\$ = Moderate: \$11-\$17; \$\$\$ = Expensive: \$18-\$24; \$\$\$\$ = Very Expensive: more than \$25

ONE BELL = Pleasantly quiet (less than 65 decibels); TWO BELLS = Can talk easily (65-70); THREE BELLS = Talking normally gets difficult (70-75); FOUR BELLS = Can talk only in raised voices (75-80); BOMB = Too noisy for normal conversation (80+)

Prices are based on main courses. When entrees fall between these categories, the prices of appetizers help determine the dollar ratings. Chronicle critics make every attempt to remain anonymous. All meals are paid for by The Chronicle. Star ratings are based on a minimum of three visits. Ratings are updated continually based on at least one revisit.