



## A Swine and Dine Experience Lets Adventurous Eaters Go Hog Wild

**I** first came face to godawful face with a whole cooked pig in Spain. It was 1979, and the setting was a stodgy white-linens restaurant in a dining room undoubtedly filled with tourists. The room quieted as our waiter excitedly whispered that we'd be meeting the something-or-other mayor. A city leader! We'll shake hands!



A recent snout-to-tail dinner at Cask & Larder featured crudité's as an appetizer (above) and the *pièce de résistance* (facing page): the suckling pig's head surrounded by tenderloin, belly and shoulder meat.

Then a staffer wheeled in a cart hauling the glossy carcass of a pudgy little pig with an apple in its mouth, just like on TV. As flashbulbs popped, a toque-topped chef stood beaming proudly alongside. Turned out he was *el cocinero mayor*: the head chef.

Here in Orlando, I recently had an entirely different "whole suckling pig" experience. Cask & Larder, a casual Progressive-Southern restaurant, cooked up an entire whole-animal feast for me and seven friends.

The elaborate meal was indicative of a nationwide "snout-to-tail" trend, which has restaurants preparing and serving every part of the animal, not just the familiar ribs and loins.

Cask & Larder's Chef de Cuisine Dennis Bernard notes that big-city restaurants such as New York's The Breslin are plating up as many as a dozen pint-size beasts per day.

The trend is catching on in Central Florida as well, judging by Cask & Larder's a la carte dinner menu, where braised lamb neck with mint relish is listed alongside more common entrées such as duck breast and fried chicken.

Cask & Larder co-owner James Petrakis points to his Greek ancestry as a reason behind his interest in snout-to-tail cooking.

"Family events included sharing a whole animal, like a pig or a lamb, and it always felt like a party," Petrakis says. It's just the kind of atmosphere he likes to duplicate at his popular Winter Park restaurant.

If you're interested in a whole-an-

imal dinner, you'll have to do some planning. First, you need to find at least seven other people willing to take this culinary adventure with you. That's the minimum number required, although the restaurant can accommodate groups of up to a dozen.

Then you'll need to agree upon a type of animal. So far, Cask & Larder's guests are sticking to the pig, as I did solely because a whole-pig-on-a-platter would provide the most eye-catching magazine photos.

Otherwise I might have opted for smoked duck, rib-eye and beef ribs, or a "Butcher's Feast," which isn't really an entire two- or four-legged creature, but sounded enticing for its porchetta, sausage and smoked ham. Each selection comes as part of a full three-course dinner priced from \$50 to \$75 per person.

You must make a reservation at least 72 hours in advance, sign a contract swearing on your pet puppy that you'll show up and spend at least \$400 — \$500 if you opt to eat, as we did, in The Brewery, a private room. A credit-card deposit for half of the amount is required.

Going whole hog shouldn't be fancy, and at Cask & Larder it isn't. Meals are served up family-style in the main dining room or on a wooden table in The Brewery, the glass-enclosed room where the restaurant's own beer is made.

We dined surrounded by a mash tun, a boil kettle and a metallic array of fermenting tanks. Appropriate to the setting, our group began with beverages that included a five-item beer flight









The family-style meal, served in the restaurant's brewery room (bottom left), included a flight of microbrewed beer (top left), along with sides of mac and cheese (center left) and Forono beets (center right).



that included the cleverly named dark German-style schwarzbier, "May the Schwarz Beer With You."

As we sipped and chatted, two young gentlemen ceremoniously carried in the entire pig on a wooden board, its carcass shiny from the application of an herb-laced vinegar-oil glaze. The star of the show remained on its perch as we turned our attention to the appetizers.

For the crudités, raw and blanched turnips, radishes, snap beans and carrots were tossed with seasoned oil and herbs, and served over a refreshingly biting, creamy vinegar-based "boiled" dressing.

Yet another was a salad of gentle bibb lettuce with pecans, hushpuppy crumbs and a mild yet tangy butter-milk vinaigrette.

The pig was removed and returned to us butchered and presented on two platters. One featured the head, face up in the center, surrounded by pulled bits of tenderloin, belly and shoulder meat with a sprinkling of curly fried-skin chicharrones on top. On the other were the limbs: "legs with feet attached," as Bernard says, and with the skin still on.

Little creamers were filled with two sauces, both so very, very good that every time I heaped more meat on my plate I added puddles of both on either side. One was a verde mix of olive oil with parsley, chervil, tarragon, chives, pickled red onion and lemon juice. The other, called Campbell's Gold after the sous chef who conjured it up, had a mustard flavor, thanks to pickled mustard seeds and mustard powder to-



PHOTOS: RAFAEL TONGOL

gether with apple cider vinegar and brown sugar.

To eat the flesh bare, or with one of the toppings? With every delightful forkful, I struggled with the choice.

The pig had been brined for two days prior to our arrival to make it flavorful and tender, then slow-smoked over peach wood in a rotisserie-style smoker at 200 degrees for six hours, basted hourly.

The side dishes beckoned with just as much charisma. The macaroni and cheese was tender and creamy, especially delectable with pickled mustard seeds and a ham-cheddar crumble over the top.

The Forono beets were luscious disks tossed with creamy ricotta cheese, crisp hazelnuts and a light vinaigrette infused with barbecue rub spices.

And the plateful of dragon beans impressed, nestled in a confit of fat and lemon juice, braised until tender, then tossed with butter, pickled pearl onions and fried garlic chips. “We find it fun to send out extra stuff that’s not on the menu for a little surprise,” Bernard says.

The eight of us kept loading up our plates, devouring the contents and reaching for more, arms stretching, bodies bending, as we grabbed for platters again and again.

All of which did not stop us from inhaling dessert. As the finale, we were served one portion of every dessert on the night’s menu. The situation could have gotten ugly as we battled over the chocolate silk pie and chocolate-mint sorbet, although I was busy popping the peanut butter-white chocolate and chocolate-chip cookies in my mouth, with an orange financier or two between treats.

The caramel pudding, served with fried beer donuts, was so good I want the recipe, and we had five other chilled scoops — eggnog, buttered pecan and banana pudding ice cream plus pear-bourbon and pomegranate sorbets — as well as a Kentucky bourbon cake and an apple-fennel cobbler besides.

This dinner was a near-perfect experience, but I’d suggest the managers boost the information factor. We weren’t given printed menus listing the evening’s dishes, and we had to practically force the otherwise capable servers to tell us what was on the table.

“Oh, what’s that?” we’d ask, and the answer would be something along the lines of, “The salad.” Or, “How long was the pig cooked?” The response? “I’ll ask the chef.”

*Really?* And, several of the details we dragged out of the staff turned out to be wrong. Groups that spend the time and money to participate in a food-focused event like this crave details, and the staff should know and volunteer the minutiae verbally or place a meal-specific paper menu at each seat.

Enthused about our snout-to-tail adventure, I posted a photo of the pig head platter on Facebook. A friend re-



**After consuming an entire beast and an assortment of side dishes, you’ll think you can’t eat another bite. But you’ll be unable to resist the dessert sampler, which features chocolate silk pie, chocolate mint sorbet, caramel pudding, apple-fennel cobbler, fried beer donuts, an assortment of cookies and Kentucky bourbon cake.**

sponded “ick.” This dinner is not for folks like her.

It’s for those of us who will overlook eyes and snouts and hoofs — or get a kick out of shocking Facebook followers — and fly high on flavor. In fact, according to Bernard, some groups have asked to have the head split open so they can eat the brains, or have the tail served so they can munch on that.

If you’d enjoy a homey family-style feast of good-quality yet not fussy food with a gabby group of friends, book yourself a table, preferably in the brewery room. Bring a camera and an empty belly. ■

*Rona Gindin, dining editor of Orlando Life, has written about food for Saveur, Fodor’s, Discover and Caribbean Travel & Life, among many other publications. She’s the author of The Little Black Book of Walt Disney World and hosts On Dining, a restaurant-themed television show on Bright House On Demand.*