

The Press Democrat

Calistoga's Indian Springs gets its dining groove with Sam's Social Club

CAREY SWEET

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Sam's Social Club

Where: 1712 Lincoln Avenue, Calistoga

When: Breakfast 8 to 10:30 a.m. Mon.-Fri.; Lunch 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Mon.-Fri.; Dinner 5:30 to 9 p.m. Mon.-Wed., 5:30 to 9:30 p.m. Thurs.-Sun.; Brunch 8 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Sat & Sun.

Contact: (707) 942-4969, indianspringscalistoga.com

Cuisine: California, American

Price: Very Expensive, entrées \$17-\$38

Corkage: First bottle complimentary; \$20 thereafter

Stars: ** ½

Back in the mid 19th Century, Gold Rush millionaire Sam Brannan took one look at Calistoga's ancient geothermal springs, and thought, "money."

The land's original residents, the Wappo Indians, had settled Calistoga some 8,000 years ago, and believed that the geysers' steaming mineral water had healing powers. Even more special, Brannan's site also boasted a deposit of pure volcanic ash from the eruption of Lake County's Mount Konocti millions of years ago, and legend said that this

soot, combined with the rich water, created a magical mud to restore body and spirit.

So, in 1861, Brannan opened a geyser-fed spa and lodge for elite Bay Area families. Generation after generation, the place thrived. Yet one thing was lacking: a restaurant.

Scout ahead to early 2015. Current Indian Springs Resort & Spa owners John and Pat Merchant had just wrapped up a \$20 million renovation and expansion, and as the crowning touch, they debuted Sam's Social Club in a brand new, 6,000 square foot building near the property's signature Olympic-sized mineral pool. Offering breakfast, lunch, dinner and weekend brunch, it was designed to open up the 17-acre oasis to visitors and locals alike.

Unfortunately, my first dinner visit then hardly thrilled me. The eclectic Cal-American menu read nicely enough, yet there was little flavor impact in the many mainstream dishes like deviled eggs or Bolognese pasta. A few plates stood out – I recall an excellent house-made ricotta and chevre tortellini smothered in spring vegetables and carrot butter – but overall, there were much more interesting restaurants in the neighborhood, like Evangeline and Solbar.

Last summer, a new chef was installed. Sort of. Shaun McGrath was sous chef when Sam's opened; he was promoted when opening chef Kory Stewart departed. And today, the menu still features some of the same original dishes, plus many quite similar ones. Except now, the kitchen has found its groove, and Sam's has become a pleasing destination.

First off, the place is stylish. Swank, even, with a gently arched roof that looks like shutter blinds, brass head nail trim leather chairs set at wood bistro tables seating 90 guests, woven dome pendant lighting, and, behind the big wood bar, a showpiece Gatsby-esque mural by Berkeley artist Lauren McIntosh.

There's outdoor dining, as well, on tree-shaded, hill-flanked patio set with fire pits and a natural geyser-fed fountain carved into a stone wall. It's a delightful place for a sunset appetizer or daily market ceviche

tumbled with avocado and lime pickled onion scooped with sweet potato chips (\$18). Add a cocktail, like the Caliente Mule of housemade pepper infused vodka, ginger beer, pineapple juice and angostura bitters (\$13), a glass of wine from the California focused list, or a beer – Sam’s makes its own brews in the restaurant cellar, including a refreshing Cannonball Blonde Ale (\$6).

Here’s Sam’s real secret weapon, however: breakfast. An egg-in-the-hole is so delicious, it’s almost absurd (\$16). First, the chef takes a big, thick slab of housemade brioche and coats it in Parmesan and what must be a wicked amount of butter. He cuts a hole in the center, and drops in an egg. Then he pan-fries the bread to a bronzed crunch that’s almost a shellac, giving way to custardy brioche and runny-golden egg sprinkled in pepper.

A nest of arugula and choice of chopped fruit or fried potatoes is good alongside, but the surprise comes with a puddle of creamy mushroom beneath the brioche. Dunk the bread for bites of crunch, silk, tangy and earthy all at once.

I also crave the sophisticated mushroom scramble, the eggs stocked with cultivated and wild mushrooms, Gruyere, a touch of black truffle oil and crisp scallions (\$15). The avocado toast, too, wins for its unusual but effective plating of country bread layered in sliced avocado, halved soft boiled egg, toasted seeds, sliced radishes and baby arugula (\$15).

Then, there are the candy cap churros, which the chef wisely offers as a lunch and dinner dessert, but also as a breakfast entrée (\$9). Hot, thick churro wands tempt with crunchy exteriors and pillowy interiors, dusted with cinnamon and sugar and served with dulce de leche drizzled ice cream; the candy cap mushroom nuance reminds of maple.

At dinner, food still wavers – fried chicken was bland and dry on one visit, and nicely salty and juicy on another (Monday night special, \$28). Fried Brussels sprouts (\$8) were unmercifully overcooked one evening, and fine on another.

But staples hit the mark, and it’s impossible to go wrong with classics like a half dozen Hog Island oysters presented on ice with mignonette,

cocktail and hot sauces (\$18) a charcuterie board generously laden with La Quercia prosciutto, Fra' Mani salumi and Heritage Country Pate (\$20, even better with an added cheese, like Humboldt Fog rounded out with assorted nuts, fruit and crostini, \$5).

Small touches elevate some dishes, such as a first-rate chargrilled rib eye luxuriously topped in lots of rich marrow butter alongside charred Walla Walla onion escabeche and a small metal tureen of crispy frites (\$38), or the Bolognese that's more flavorful than I remembered, the homemade pasta draped in sauce spiked with oxtail, Pecorino-Romano, Calabrian chile and a sprinkle of breadcrumbs (\$28).

And even if grilled octopus is on so many menus these days, this version reminds me why the properly prepared dish remains so popular. Fat, tender seafood curls around peppery arugula, crispy potato chunks, tart Castelvetro olives and a swath of romesco sauce (\$16).

At dessert, my server offered a sly suggestion: pair the coffee and Kahlua chocolate cake dressed in passion fruit sauce and vanilla Chantilly cream (\$9) with The Prophet dessert cocktail of espresso, Jameson Irish Whiskey, Amaretto and Turbinado syrup (\$13).

It was a rich finish to a restaurant that's wealthy with dining possibilities.

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