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Cavalier offers English pub grub, with S.F. vibe

By **Michael Bauer** Published 12:06 am, Sunday, September 29, 2013



Photo: John Storey, Special To The Chronicle



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Boat of Prawns (\$15) is an updated take on the shrimp cocktail, with five whole prawns accompanied by Marie Rose sauce and Malabar spinach.

Anna Weinberg has the magic touch. Three restaurants, three runaway hits.

First came Marlowe in SoMa, which arose from the ashes of her failed South. That was followed by Park Tavern in the North Beach space that formerly housed Moose's.

Last month, she took the biggest gamble of all, opening The Cavalier in the Hotel Zetta near Westfield Centre, recently taken over by the **Viceroy Hotel Group** and rebranded. The restaurant has been through a rash of owners, starting with the high-profile **Michel Richard** of Washington, D.C., who in 2007 was named the nation's Outstanding Chef by the **James Beard**

While Weinberg, her husband **James Nicholas** and chef/partner **Jennifer Puccio** might not yet have that vaunted a reputation, they are quickly gaining ground.

For this restaurant, Weinberg and Puccio offer their own take on British pub food, but you can't keep the California touch out of the kitchen. The menu starts with appetizers, segues into a section on eggs and cheese, then on to main courses, rotisserie items and sides.

To reinforce the theme, designer **Ken Fulk** dug into his collection of stuffed animal heads, which cover the deep red and charcoal walls between the large arched windows overlooking Fifth Street and the none-too-scenic Jessie Street. Red awnings and geranium-filled flower boxes give life to the black facade.

Old World vibe

When you step onto the rich marble floors,, it's like another world. The double doors frame a wooden host stand that resembles a country church altar from another era. To the left is the lounge, seating about 45, where the bar is defined by hanging lights from an old cathedral, and to the right are three rooms, holding about 90 diners in all, with slightly different looks within the same theme. One has deep red walls with black banquettes; the second has charcoal walls and red-leather tufted banquettes; and the third is dominated by a hunting scene mural. With plaid wallpaper in the halls and shelves filled with antique objects including vintage books, Turkish vases and quirky taxidermy, the restaurant exudes a rich, but not overdone, Old World vibe.

At the end of the dining room behind a wall of shelves is a "secret" room called Marianne's, a private members bar and event space. Weinberg named it after her idol, **Marianne Faithfull**; for inspiration Fulk used the cover of the **Rolling Stones'** 1968 *Beggars Banquet* album, which has a gluttonous, Gothic look. Creating the different dining areas and the private club was a clever way to break up the long, narrow space that under previous owners looked like bowling alleys placed end to end.

While the menu heads in a different direction, you can feel Puccio's hand in the rustic offerings, as at Marlowe and Park Tavern. Flavors are rich but stop just short of feeling heavy.

Dishes for sharing

The Cavalier Salad (\$14) is dominated by earthy truffle oil that coats the lettuce, green beans, thin coins of red-ringed radishes and gossamer shavings of cheese. It's bold but balanced. Equally robust is the farro and roasted beet salad (\$13); smoked sea salt adds a dominant element that's lightened with basil, pea tendrils and pumpkin seeds.

Puccio updates the shrimp cocktail as a "boat of prawns" (\$15) where five whole prawns are lined up sentry-style in a gravy boat with a small dish of **Marie Rose** sauce, a type of mild Thousand Island, surrounded by fleshy Malabar spinach that's practically as good as the sweet prawns when dipped in the sauce.

Deviled crab and rock shrimp (\$15), served in a lidded canning jar, could come across as heavy except for the beautifully arranged rows of cucumber slices that stand in for bread. They're the right accompaniment, along with lemon aioli that can be dabbed on top.

Cured fishes (\$16) are another dish that demands to be shared. On one side of the platter is smoked salmon with soft bread points and goat butter, divided by a line of paper-thin radishes from the boquerones and a quenelle of extra-rich butter. It's exceptional with one of the well-crafted cocktails on the menu.

The egg category includes a duck egg (\$14) that's encrusted in confit, Scotch-Egg style. It's warm and crusty outside, but when you cut through the meat, the yolk is still slightly liquid and oozes into the stone fruit chutney and the spicy greens.

Sterling fish and chips

I haven't found fish and chips (\$22) better than what's served here. The fish may change - it's now petrale sole - but the coating is always thin and glasslike, just past golden but stopping short of mahogany.

The fish is served with minted peas topped with pea shoots and the best fries in the city, triple-fried in rice bran oil. Anyone who has tried them, or the hamburger, at Marlowe or Park Tavern, will need no convincing.

Puccio changed the burger for this location. Instead of the horseradish aioli, crisp bacon, cheddar cheese and caramelized onions, she tops the thick patty (\$16) with English cheddar, mustard, onions and, for my taste, a too-sweet tomato chutney. It may be that I've never been partial to ketchup or sweet elements on my burger, but in this case it was the least impressive item on the menu. Plus, the meat was dry.

Few steaks are better than what's served here: The well-seared rib eye (\$32) is coated with a sauce with globules of bone marrow that further enrich the meat. Alongside are chips made with the beef drippings; they are good, but I'd ask to substitute the regular fries.

Lighter offerings

Sunday Roast Chicken (\$26) conjures up a familiar scene from a bygone era, but you'd be lucky to get anything like this at home. The meat is larded with bacon and served on creamy horseradish mashed potatoes with baby carrots and meticulously seasoned mustard-bacon jus.

In addition, there's an excellent wild mushroom pie (\$19) served in an oval casserole; the bronzed crust encloses chanterelles, king trumpets, hen of the woods, artichokes, leeks and peas. For lighter appetites, there's sauteed petrale sole (\$26), scattered with dices of preserved lemons, orange and sea beans.

The three rotisserie items don't come with sides, which give you an excuse to delve into that category: tiny marble potatoes roasted in chicken fat (\$7); minted peas with yellow wax, green and romano beans (\$8) or sliced heirloom tomatoes with a small pitcher of basil vinaigrette (\$8).

An intensely flavored California leg of lamb (\$19) is served rare, with a stainless steel boat of gravy. Pork and beef bangers (\$16), also locally made, come with a caramelized onion sauce; they cry out for a side of horseradish mashed potatoes (\$7).

Superb service

Dessert includes a refreshing, but deceptively rich, lemon pousseur (\$8), a custard topped with a thin layer of the juice from tea-poached plums and elderflower liqueur. A sprinkling of sea salt seems to tame the sweetness and bring out the bright notes in the citrus.

There's also an exceptional double-crust crumble (\$7) with blueberries, custard and anise hyssop, which has a slight licorice flavor. Other offerings include steamed pudding (\$9), a lighter, cake-like version of the British staple, surrounded by rhubarb, strawberries and whipped creme fraiche; and a thin, crisp hazelnut tart (\$9) garnished with raspberry jam, fresh figs and hazelnut ice cream.

Weinberg, who is one of the best front-of-the-house people in the Bay Area, shows her expertise in training the staff; they can give a master's dissertation on the dishes and ingredients. Play Stump the Waiter and they will win. It's part of the package that makes all her restaurants popular.

I also appreciate the kitchen's take on shrimp cocktail (\$15), with head-on, boldly spiced shrimp arched over what looks like the classic cocktail sauce. But one dip into the deep red sauce reveals a hefty dose of booze and a fiery heat that's a culinary equivalent of S&M.

The nuances of a chef's palate are often revealed in soup, and the creamy mushroom (\$11) reinforces what you might already know: Puccio and Cecchini can coax the maximum flavor from the minimum number of ingredients. It's like the essence of mushrooms, thick with whipped creme fraiche and served with black truffle gougeres.

Two classics also get fresh infusions: steak tartare (\$13) and roasted bone marrow (\$14) that's served with a salsa verde so good, you might want to spread it on bread, along with a small pile of dressed parsley and chervil that helps cut the richness and reset the palate.

For main courses, black cod (\$28) is delicately smoked, which seems to bring out a natural sweetness in the fish. The fillet is bedded on wild rice and celery root puree, which also features artichoke barigoule, grilled leeks and fennel. It seems like a lot going on, but the kitchen staff are like fine artists who can blend red and yellow to come up with the perfect orange.

They also coat a large pork chop (\$27) in harissa and place it on broccoli and sugar pie pumpkin; it's hearty and familiar, but with a spicy tune-up.

As if mastering the savory courses weren't enough, this year Weinberg and Puccio pulled off a coup when they hired **Emily Luchetti**, the author of six cookbooks and the dean of pastry chefs in the city, to handle the pastries in all the Big Night Restaurant Group composed of Marlowe, Park Tavern and Cavalier. Luchetti, who worked at Stars in its heyday and then went on to Waterbar and Farallon, was honored by the James Beard Foundation as Outstanding Pastry Chef in 2004.

At Marlowe, she's created a gingerbread (\$9) that telescopes the season: The thick, tender square of cake needs nothing more than a scoop of vanilla ice cream on top and a caramel sauce below. It rivals Loretta's Vacherin as the must-order dessert.

There's also an excellent chocolate cream pie (\$9); it's not really a pie, but it's so good I won't quibble. A layer of chocolate crumb crust is pressed into the bottom of a squat canning jar, then topped with chocolate pudding that's like whipped milk chocolate and whipped cream.

With this type of food, excellent service and an expanded interior, Marlowe is both comfortable and original. Yet even though Weinberg, her husband, James Nicholas, and Puccio have three restaurants, Marlowe was their first. It's grown up some, but it's still their baby, and you can feel the love.

The Cavalier may take license with the English pub theme, but it has a fun vibe - evoking London by way of San Francisco.

The Cavalier

360 Jessie St. (at Fifth Street), San Francisco

(415) 321-6000. www.thecavaliersf.com

Dinner 5:30-10 p.m. Sunday-Wednesday, until 11 p.m. Thursday-Saturday. Opening on Tuesday for breakfast and lunch 7 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Full bar. Reservations and credit cards accepted. Valet \$14 at Hotel Zetta.

Overall: Rating: **THREE STARS**

Food: Rating: THREE STARS

Service: Rating: THREE STARS

Atmosphere: Rating: THREE STARS

Prices: \$\$\$ (Most entrees less than \$25)

Noise rating: Noise Rating: BOMB Too noisy for normal conversation (80+ decibels)

Rating: FOUR STARS Extraordinary Rating: THREE STARS Excellent Rating: TWO STARS Good Rating: **ONE STAR Fair**

Noise Rating: BOMB Poor

The wine list

The Cavalier has a finely crafted wine list, but I never got past the cocktails. The list includes Cavalier Classics such as an exceptional Pimm's Cup (\$11) with gin, Pimm's No. 1, cucumber, lemon soda and a big tuft of fresh mint; and the boozy Barrister (\$13) with Buffalo Trace Bourbon, Nardini Amaro, white vermouth and Benedictine.

The bar also pays homage to time-honored cocktails, giving the place and date they were invented. The White Lady (\$13) is credited to the Savoy in 1930 and updated with local gin, creole shrub and lemon. The Whiz Bang (\$13) from the Sports Club in 1920 is made with scotch, cherry heering, sweet vermouth and a splash of absinthe. I could pick about anything on the list and be happy.

The by-the-glass wine list includes 17 selections. About half come from France, such as the 2009 Chateau de Marjolet Cotes du Rhone (\$11) and the 2011 Luneau-Papin Clos des Allées Muscadet (\$12).

The bottle list created by **Casey Doolin**, beverage director at Cavalier's sister restaurant, Park Tavern, is more than half French, including fine selections from peripheral regions such as the Savoie.

Doolin has made it easy to find some very good wines for less than \$50; markups are reasonable, and there are a few bargain gems scattered throughout the 115 selections such as the 2005 Turley Dogtown Zinfandel (\$80). It retails for \$60 to \$75 if you can find it.

Of the six beers, half come from England, including Fuller's Black Cab Stout (\$11 for 17 ounces) and Old Golden Hen (\$6).

If you bring your own wine, corkage is \$20.