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Marlowe makes the right move into Coco500

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The Little Gem salad's cold greens are accented with smashed avocado, shaved carrots, watermelon radishes, and whole leaves of parsley and other herbs in a citrus vinaigrette.

It's a risky venture to move a wildly successful restaurant to a new location. Every space has its own feng shui that goes deeper than the color of the walls, the types of tables or even the food being served.

So while designers can try, each space carries its own personality that creates a visceral reaction. For example, have you ever gone into a spot that looks sleek, shiny and well designed but feels uncomfortable? Or, on the other hand, found a restaurant that looks a little funky but warms the heart?

It set off an alarm when I heard that Marlowe, which had only 48 seats on Townsend, was moving into Coco500, nearly doubling the capacity.

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The designers tried to duplicate the feel of the original restaurant that opened in 2010 and was named after owner **Anna Weinberg's** great-grandfather, who had a butcher shop in Boston. It does have a similar look: white hexagonal tile floors, black-and-white tile walls, with one wall of distressed wood. The reference to a meat market is even clearer here than at the original location, which is only a block away.

But what really impressed me was that when I entered the space, I felt that I was in Marlowe. Even the menu is much the same: You'll find the poulet vert (\$26), one of the best roast chickens, doused in herb sauce; deviled eggs served warm with provolone, bacon and pickled jalapenos (\$2.50); and the Marlowe hamburger (\$16).

I still contend that hamburger is the best in the city. It has a bit of lamb worked into the patty for extra flavor, then it's topped with cheddar cheese, caramelized onions, bacon and shredded lettuce, and served on a toasted Acme bun slathered with horseradish aioli. The accompanying fries — triple-fried in rice bran oil — are equally good. The hamburger has become so important that Weinberg is opening a take-out window on Brannan so diners can order one on the go.

Coco500 was also a popular spot, so the new owners respected what was there, while making some changes. They lowered the partition between the dining room and bar — which is now distinguished by white marble tables — to make it feel like one space, and built a wooden bar back filled with elements that look like they could have been in place for a century or more. The windows that look out over Brannan Street remain, but they converted a storage area into a covered patio, adding 15 additional seats.

Part of the back wall and the kitchen walls are covered in waffled stainless steel, which has a sleek industrial feel. It not only looks like a smart design decision, but it's practical. Weinberg knows that the subway construction will soon be under way right outside her door, and dust and vermin seem to get into every crack and crevice. The stainless steel is rodent-proof and can easily be cleaned.

The restaurant also retains a friendly vibe; Weinberg is one of the best front-of-the-house people in the city, and she knows how to pick and train staff who have a similar efficient, warm vision.

For her part, chef and co-owner Jennifer Puccio, with the help of chef de cuisine **Dante Cecchini**, a 2014 Chronicle Rising Star, kept the menu rustic and familiar, but there are always a few surprises.

Puccio promised the battered green beans would be on the menu, one of the most famous dishes from Coco500, but instead, at least for now, they've changed out the beans for chicken-fried okra (\$7). I would have been disappointed, but the substitution is so good, I was seduced. I also loved the lemon aioli that accompanied them. In the pantheon of great fried okra, these are the best.

They kept their word on retaining another item, even naming it after Coco500 chef-owner **Loretta Keller**: the chocolate vacherin (\$10), one of the best desserts in the world. It's a disk of meringue topped with coffee ice cream and doused in creme anglaise, chocolate sauce and toasted almonds.

The 10 bites that kick off the menu speak to the ever-growing bar culture; in the move, Weinberg also acquired a full liquor license and has made the most of it. The cocktails are well crafted, whether it's a spot-on classic Boulevardier (\$12) with rye, **Carpano Antica** and Campari; or what they call the Bull (\$11), with gin, vermouth, tonic, rosemary, thyme and lime.

To go with the cocktails, you'll find the deviled eggs and okra as well as the crispy Brussels sprouts chips (\$9), another popular Marlowe signature. Then there are baked oysters (\$3 each) topped with a thick version of New England chowder, as well as raw ones with smoked mignonette (\$18 for six).

One of the best items — destined to be another signature — is French breakfast radish toast (\$8), where the vegetable is finely minced with a pesto made with the leaves and house-cultured butter, and piled onto toasted levain.

Starters like the Little Gem salad (\$12) also made the move. The cold greens are accented with smashed avocado, shaved carrots, watermelon radishes, and whole leaves of parsley and other herbs in a citrus vinaigrette.

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.

Michael Bauer is The San Francisco Chronicle's restaurant critic. Find his blog at <http://insidescoopsf.sfgate.com> and his reviews on www.sfgate.com. E-mail: mbauer@sfchronicle.com Twitter: @michaelbauer1

★ ★ ★

Marlowe

Food: ★ ★ ★

Service: ★ ★ ★

Atmosphere: ★ ★ ★

Prices: \$\$\$

Noise: Four Bells

500 Brannan St. (at Fourth Street), San Francisco; (415) 777-1413. www.marlowesf.com

Lunch 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Monday-Friday (all-day menu until 5:30 p.m.); dinner 5:30-10 p.m. Sunday-Thursday, until 11 p.m. Thursday-Saturday. Full bar. 4% S.F. surcharge. Reservations and credit cards accepted. Difficult street parking.