

San Francisco Chronicle

Park Tavern review: A worthy successor to Moose's

By **Michael Bauer** Published 4:00 am, Sunday, October 30, 2011



Photo: John Storey, Special To The Chronicle



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The Smoked Deviled Eggs at Park Tavern Restaurant in San Francisco, Calif., is seen on Sunday, October 23, 2011.

Taking over the space of a famous restaurant like Moose's is a gamble. The previous tenant, Joey and Eddie's, made a valiant effort but never built much traction, even though it was advertised as Bronx Italian, and the family-style concept seemed to fit the area's ethos. Instead, it's taken a New Zealander to restore the prominent North Beach location to landmark status.

With Park Tavern, owner **Anna Weinberg** and chef **Jennifer Puccio**, who came together at Marlowe, have created a restaurant that feels like what New York's Balthazar might be if it were transported to San Francisco. The restaurant is still in its honeymoon period, but the place could end up being the Stars of the 21st century.

The menu is innovative but approachable, and the happening vibe attracts a wide range of patrons - young, old, artistic and business-minded. It's becoming a salon where everyone can enjoy themselves and hobnob with other types of people.

Weinberg is the affable host who conveys a similar caring attitude to the staff. She understands success from Marlowe; more importantly, she understands failure and the art of turning around difficult situations. She opened Stella in New York near SoHo/Tribeca on Sept. 10, 2001, the day before the **World Trade Center** attacks. She eventually sold her share, and the restaurant became Salt.

She fell in love, married and moved to San Francisco, where she partnered with celebrity Australian chef **Luke Mangan** to open South across from the **Caltrain** station. But the Australian concept never clicked, so last year she reinvented it, redesigning the interior, bringing in Puccio and opening up as Marlowe. It was an immediate success.

Larger location

The Moose's space is about three times as large as Marlowe, so taking that over was still a risk. Yet it's as if she wrote the playbook of how to do everything right, including redoing the interior and making it feel like a place that has been around for a century. She stripped the carpet and installed a black-and-white hexagonal tile floor, and installed a second layer of soundproofing that squelches the annoying high-pitched tones but keeps the buzz.

She also added distressed wood beams to the ceiling and dark shiny subway tile to the walls. The open kitchen remains, but it's partly obscured by a glass-topped wood partition and a brown leatherette banquette. Weinberg and sister-in-law **Kendra Nicholas-Nash** smartly added even more banquettes, resulting in 10 prime corner tables and eliminating any bad ones. Plus, the reconfiguration of the 115-seat room created a charming cafe-like area overlooking Stockton Street and Washington Square Park.

The layout of the 47-seat lounge is the same as when it was Moose's, but a Carrara marble top has been added to the 17-seat bar, and the long communal table has been narrowed for more intimacy. Weinberg also hired really good bartenders who pay homage to the Mooses with such drinks as **Mary Etta's** Bubbles (\$10) and Ed's Negroni (\$10).

Weinberg and Puccio made a clever strategic move to forgo the expected Italian menu in favor of American brasserie-tavern flavors that feel as fresh and as grounded as the interior.

The selection of starters and nibbles is divided into raw, fried and smoked dishes. The last category includes deviled eggs (\$1.50 each) gently smoked and combined with bacon and pickled jalapenos; exceptional house-made beef jerky (\$6), properly chewy and spicy; and a mild sablefish dip (\$10) that's perfect with cocktails.

Raw doesn't just mean crudo, either - although you can get slices of local halibut (\$12) splayed out with avocado, corn, sea beans and tomatoes; and briny pillows of Mendocino uni (\$11) mellowed by avocado and chile oil. My favorite raw dish is a plate of bite-size vegetables (\$7) - radishes, carrots, green cauliflower and celery on one recent visit - surrounding a green goddess dip thick with tarragon and other fresh herbs.

From the fried list, you can't go wrong with chicken-fried green tomatoes (\$7); Brussels sprouts chips (\$6), the crisp-fried leaves made famous at Marlowe; or beautiful oysters (\$12) served with a Caesar-like dressing and seasoned romaine leaves so diners can wrap everything together and pick it up with their hands.

Appetizers, soups and salads include studied but not gimmicky presentations such as heirloom carrots (\$9) arranged on a thick green swipe of pesto made from carrot tops and toasted pine nuts. Puccio also creates one of the best versions of clam chowder (\$12) I've had, thick with seafood and a fine mince of vegetables, and topped with shaved bottarga that pumps up the salinity of the creamy broth.

Main courses

The main courses include the Marlowe burger (\$13), which has successfully made the move across town. The patty contains lamb for extra flavor, and is topped with bacon, cheddar, caramelized onions and horseradish aioli. It's still one of the best in the city, served with fries boasting a glassy exterior and creamy interior, a result of their bubble bath of rice bran oil.

The standout main course, sure to be much photographed and copied, is the small whole chicken (\$22). Bronzed by the wood oven, it stands straight up on a unique cast-iron plate. As you carve it - waiters bring a bucket for the bones - the slices fall into a pool of chopped spinach, the top crisp from the oven, with tiny potatoes looking like eggs in grass.

Puccio also does an amazing job on the grilled pork chop (\$24) with Italian butter beans and kale. Park Tavern is also the place for a thick, juicy New York strip steak (\$29) served with a red wine jus and prosciutto butter that add to the meatiness, and those marvelous fries.

The only thing I can criticize is the heavy hand with salt - and I'm practically a salt addict. On my visits, the caramelized scallops (\$24) and the local albacore (\$25) were so over-seasoned that it dulled the other elements.

The dessert menu includes another sure-to-be-copied dish: birthday cake of the month (\$7), making the restaurant a draw for celebrations. This month, it's an outstanding coconut cake; in November, look for a tres leches cake. Other sweets include a lemon cheesecake parfait (\$7), chocolate creme brulee (\$7), fruit crisp (\$7) and boozy ice cream floats (\$9).

Every day seems like a birthday at Park Tavern. Weinberg has been blessed with **Ed Moose's** charm, making everyone feel special. Her passion and desire to make people happy permeate the place, leaving diners wanting to come back.

It left me with Stars in my eyes.

Park Tavern

1652 Stockton St. (near Filbert), San Francisco

(415) 989-7300 or parktavernsf.com

Dinner 5:30-11 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday, until 10 p.m. Sunday. Bar open until midnight Sunday, Tuesday-Thursday, until 12:30 a.m. Friday-Saturday. Full bar. Reservations and credit cards accepted. Paid lots nearby; valet \$11.

Overall: Rating: **THREE STARS**

Food: Rating: THREE STARS

Service: Rating: THREE STARS

Atmosphere: Rating: THREE AND A HALF STARS

Prices: \$\$\$ (Most main courses less than \$25)

Noise rating: Noise Rating: FOUR BELLS Can only talk in raised voices (75-80 decibels)

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

Noise Rating: BOMB Poor

The wine list

Park Tavern's menu is filled with assertive flavors, reflected in the interesting wine list created by Casey Doolin. It's a list meant for drinkers, with more than 130 by the bottle, 32 by the glass and seven by the 13-ounce carafe. Markups are high, but the staff is knowledgeable.

While you'll get your share of Chardonnays, you'll also find three Gruner Veltliners and two Malvasias. In reds, there just as many Sangiovese blends as there are Pinot Noirs.

There are also seven rosés, a versatile choice that has become my go-to wine as prices continue to soar. The selection includes a variety of styles, such as the 2010 Unti from Sonoma, a Grenache/Mourvedre blend (\$41); the 2010 Domaine du Salvard from the Loire, a Pinot Noir and Gamay blend (\$35); and the 2009 Bernard Griffin Sangiovese from Washington (\$29).

It took me a while to explore the list because I was so captivated by the cocktails. Yet when I first saw the ingredients in the Country Lawyer (\$13) - Knob Creek, Zucca Amaro, Bianco vermouth, Benedictine and chocolate bitters - I thought it was a disaster in the making, especially for the price.

One sip and I changed my mind. The balance was superb and the bitters added an earthy background. That hard-to-achieve balance showed on other drinks as well.

If you go for beer, six are on tap, 10 are in bottles.

Corkage is \$15, but is waived for every bottle purchased from the list.