

dining HOPE S. PHILBRICK

Touch of Tahoe

Pacific Kitchen delivers taste of California to Inman Park

TO CLAIM THAT A RESTAURANT serves "California Cuisine" is so commonplace it's almost cliché, but pulling around the uphill bend into the parking lot of Inman Park's new Pacific Kitchen, I'm transported via déjà vu to Truckee, Calif.

Truckee, near North Lake Tahoe, is a historic town where dozens of quaint restaurants serve up exquisite modern

i FOOD FILE

PACIFIC KITCHEN
913 Bernina Avenue NE
404-223-9292
www.pacific-kitchen.com

Food: ★★★★★
Service: ★★★★★
Comfort and Aesthetics: ★★★★★
Value: ★★★★★
Scene: ★★★★★

fare. My expectations are immediately set high for the cuisine.

Physical details spark the comparison: Pacific Kitchen is tucked into a green hillside; it boasts a homey exterior with a large, welcoming deck; and its neighbors, including Fritti, Sotto Sotto and Two Urban Licks, serve up stiff competition.

Once inside, the likeness dissipates since the interior décor has a strong Asian influence and is more reminiscent of a bistro in San Francisco than a small mountain town. The simple dark woods and light fabrics, though inviting and comfortable, seem to say that food is the focus here, as it should be.

After poor reviews followed Pacific Kitchen's grand opening in May, Nick Leahy was named the new executive chef at the end of July. Leahy's goal is to incorporate high-quality, fresh ingredients in the seasonal menu. He favors local, organic produce sourced from local farmers' markets as well as the restaurant's own herb garden. Very Californian, indeed.

On a recent Sunday evening, it's a breeze to get reservations. But before appetizers are finished, the dining room is full. "Fridays and Saturdays are our busiest nights," the server says.

Dining on Sunday offers another potential advantage: Bottles of wine are half



Pacific Kitchen doesn't just rest on its name to promise California Cuisine, it delivers.

price. In some cases, this means that one bottle can be less expensive than two glasses. The server fails to mention the special, but confirms it's available when asked if the information on the website is correct. It's the one stumble in the otherwise steadily good service she provides.

AN AMUSE BOUCHE ARRIVES AS AN unanticipated gift from the kitchen. The deep-fried round of bacon and goat cheese is served atop micro greens. Salty and savory, it whets the appetite for fall flavors.

Bread is served with soft, sweet and dark roasted garlic cloves — a welcome change from the now-standard olive oil, with or without herb and/or spice additives, now served at many restaurants.

Spiced pumpkin ravioli (\$9) is sweeter than some desserts, in part thanks to its bourbon maple cream sauce. House-made lamb and cranberry sausage adds a savory element to temper the sugar, and toasted pumpkin seeds add crunchy texture. The stickiness is strange, but the flavor combination is delicious.

The risotto du jour (\$7) features butter-nut squash. It's creamy, yet al dente and seasoned to perfection.

Chicken Stew (\$20) features herb-roasted chicken shredded and served alongside fingerling potatoes and roasted organic onions, corn and carrots in a spicy-sweet Merlot broth. It tastes like autumn in a bowl, and the generous portion provides leftovers that reheat perfectly for lunch.

The smoked pork rack chop (\$26) bone-in meat is juicy and tender. Bacon dominates the flavor of the lentil bean cassoulet side dish, but it's an excellent pairing with the entrée. The meal's overall salty edge is tempered somewhat by tart green apple slaw and grilled cornbread.

THE GINGERBREAD CAKE (\$7) IS LIKE two desserts in one. The top of the medium-crumb cake has a well filled with caramel crème brulee. The result is a tasty, creative alternative to frosting.

Pumpkin cheesecake (\$7) is covered with blackberry compote. The sweet-tart fruit detracts from the savory should-be star of the show, a minor disappointment.

Is Inman Park an east coast Truckee? Maybe. A spontaneous concert by Paul McCartney might help seal the deal; he's done just that at Moody's in Truckee.

Is Pacific Kitchen worth your consideration? Yes. If you were disappointed before Leahy took the helm, it's time to give Pacific Kitchen another try.