

Dining

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Balboa hits its stride in Mill Valley

By Tanya Henry
IJ correspondent

SAN FRANCISCO'S Balboa Cafe brings back some fond memories. I was always surprised by how it managed to appeal to young Marina residents and longtime locals like my grandmother. I would accompany her at least once a month for her usual burger and martini. I was amused by this uncharacteristic ritual of my French Lebanese grandmother, who much preferred Middle Eastern fare to American. I'm certain now that along with the burger, she enjoyed having a neighborhood spot she could call her own.

Now that the Mill Valley outpost has been open for almost three years, it, too, has gained a following with locals. When I first reviewed the restaurant, it was uncertain of its identity.

Initially a bar scene seemed to take hold, but today it's much more family-oriented — and a children's menu along with reasonably priced happy-hour offerings are clearly directed at that crowd. A few outdoor tables and plenty of booth seating also make for a kid-friendly arrangement.

Despite its family-friendly offering, the restaurant has a grown-up feel. The handsome room has copious amounts of dark wainscoting, white tablecloths and floor to ceiling windows, and the long mahogany bar is partially separated by a barrier delineating the bar area from the dining area.

Newly appointed chef Rick Edge has 15 years overseeing kitchens on



John Roediger of Tiburon has dinner with his 13-year-old daughter Clare Roediger of Mill Valley at the Balboa Cafe in Mill Valley.



The Balboa burger, Balboa Cafe's classic, is served on a baguette with housemade pickles and french fries.

the Monterey Peninsula. He has also done stints at a couple of PlumpJack properties, including PlumpJack Cafe in San Francisco and PlumpJack

Squaw Valley Inn.

A recent heirloom tomato salad (\$11) featured lovely tomatoes at their peak, but I found a green goddess dressing heavy

While the roasted Pacific salmon and caramelized pork chop entrees — both \$26 — seemed tempting, except for their price tags. I chose to stick with the reliable burger; after all, it's what the San Francisco institution is known for. The classic burger (\$12.50) served with a mound of shoestring potatoes and tangy house-made pickles is still every bit as good as I remember. Various cheeses, grilled onions or avocado allow for personalization.

Desserts, however, are hit and miss. A peach crostada (\$9) featured lovely fresh peaches, but the crostada was unbaked and tasted too much like flour. An intriguing creamy chocolate pudding (\$7) was much better. The rectangular-shaped dessert was served with a crispy chocolate shell and oozed with delectable pudding and fresh raspberries.

Wines are offered on tap here. Balboa rotates various varietals and recently offered a Pushback Sauvignon Blanc and a Tranzatillo from San Luis Obispo.

I tried the refreshing elderflower fizz (\$9) a bubbly, sweet and festive concoction of prosecco, elderflower liqueur and a splash of soda — perfect on a hot, summer day.

As I wrote when Balboa opened, it will only be a matter of time before the Mill Valley spot becomes an institution in its own right. Though the menu could still use some tweaking to be more consistent, it's continuing to morph into what the neighborhood wants it to be.

Tanya Henry, the former senior food editor at cooking.com and a

REVIEW

BALBOA CAFE

Address: 38 Miller Ave., Mill Valley

Phone: 381-7321

Web site: www.balboacafe.com

Cuisine: American with Californian twists

Service: Professional

Noise level: Can be loud

Recommended dishes: Burger, tuna crudo, chocolate pudding

Liquor selection: Full bar

Corkage: \$15

Heart-healthy and vegetarian selections: Soups and salads

Wheelchair access: Yes

Hours: 11:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays; 4 to 10 p.m. Sundays through Thursdays; 4 to 11 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays; 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. weekends

Bar: Open daily

Credit cards: All major

Prices: \$19 to \$25

Summary: The PlumpJack Group's Balboa Cafe, initially a bar scene, has morphed to a more family-oriented place. A new chef is overseeing the menu, which features burgers and a handful of entrees. Nightly specials such as fried chicken, ribeye steak and chef specials, rotate and there's a reasonably priced happy hour menu as well.

judge at the James Beard Foundation journalism awards, has degrees in culinary arts and nutrition and lives in Marin. Follow her on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/TanyaHenry> or contact her at lifestyle@marinij.com. The IJ invites readers to post their own opinions and experiences about the restaurants featured in Wednesday's dining reviews. Enter your comments at the bottom of this story online at www.marinij.com.