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The Phantom Fork: Napa Valley Grille

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Each Tuesday The Register reviews an area restaurant, with an emphasis on establishments where a couple can dine for \$30 or less. Reader suggestions are welcomed.

Many restaurants that would stress your bank account for dinner are surprisingly affordable at lunch. A case in point is Yountville's Napa Valley Grille.

Tucked into the center at Highway 29 and Madison Street, the Napa Valley Grille doesn't have the commanding highway presence of many other restaurants on wine country's main drag.

But the vistas from the main dining areas are second to none. Diners have panoramic views of the western mountains and a vineyard across the street.

On warm days, there's a patio, nicely buffered with landscaping, for more intimate views.

We dined on a weekday when the crowd was light, the service fast. Leaving from Napa, we drove to Yountville, had a leisurely lunch and made it home again — all in well under 90 minutes.

The restaurant evokes the feeling of wine country. The carpet is a rich burgundy, the upholstered booths incorporate the natural colors of the countryside.

Ceiling-mounted wine racks border the main dining room. Wine country art hangs on the walls. Contemporary instrumental music plays in the background.

At lunch, combination plates, including a cup of soup, a small salad and a half sandwich, are \$14.75. A full-size sandwich with fries is about the same.

Starters, which could make for a light lunch, range from \$6.75 for a bowl of soup to \$12.25 for a Sonoma duck "sticky bun" with frisee salad. A plate of three Cowgirl Creamery cheeses is \$13.25. Salads made from locally harvested greens are \$8 to \$9.

On this day, the main courses, priced \$14 to \$18, included a "natural" pork loin, an oak-grilled salmon and a wood-grilled petite New York steak.

Menu details make for good reading. The salmon filet is served as a pancetta wrapped salmon-pumpkin terrine with a baby turnip-potato puree and maple essence. The steak comes with milk-poached garlic, "one-eyed susan" and "shafts of 'cave-aged' bleu cheese."

We ordered \$14.75 sandwiches. For me, the Calistoga, a braised lamb sandwich on focaccia that came with a pumpkin chowder and a butter lettuce salad.

My companion chose the St. Helena: pumpkin soup and a small Caesar accompanying a Dungeness crab melt.

Ours was a nicely appointed booth, with an ivory tablecloth and a mystery potted plant that turned out to be a dwarf ficus.

In short order, we received a basket made of grape vines holding moist focaccia and sweet French bread, with pungent olive oil and tangy balsamic vinegar on the side.

This was an exceptional bread-oil pairing. The focaccia and olive oil could have become a meal onto themselves.

Our food arrived in 10 minutes. Napa Valley Grille gets high marks for presentation. Served on a rectangular china platter, the salad, soup and sandwiches formed a delectable still-life.

Can't say enough about the pumpkin chowder, which was creamy, yet retained a strong pumpkin character. As a flavor accent, the soup was topped with a dollop of diced Turkish turban squash that had been cooked in butter as well as what the menu described as a peanut butter vinaigrette.

My butter lettuce salad was small but exciting, with halved cherry tomatoes, diced almonds and chopped egg yolks. The lettuce had been mixed with a bleu cheese cream.

My half sandwich of braised leg of lamb on grilled focaccia was loaded with exotic flavorings, including apricot tomato chutney and horseradish cream, but the end result was somehow more down to earth. I compared it to a fancy sloppy joe.

My companion's Caesar was another wonderful salad presentation, with anchovy and garlic essence, crumbled prosciutto, focaccia crostini and a cheese crisp on the side.

The open-face crab melt started with a slice of toasted French bread. The crab meat had been blended with artichoke hearts, sliced red onion, parmesan, tomato slices and topped with melted jack. An extremely tasty, though small, sandwich.

On our drive back to Napa, we had only good things to say about Napa Valley Grille. A lovely dining room, friendly service, imaginatively prepared foods that should appeal to foodies and just about anyone else.

Dinner prices are comparable to lunch in the starter and salad areas, but entrees are mostly \$20 to \$30.

Napa Valley Grille is at 6795 Washington St., at Yountville's Madison Street exit off Highway 29. Monday through Thursday, hours are 11:30 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. On Friday and Saturday, closing is 10 p.m. Sunday hours are 11 a.m. to 9:30 p.m., with brunch served until 3 p.m.

Readers with tips about interesting places to eat should e-mail diningout@napanews.com