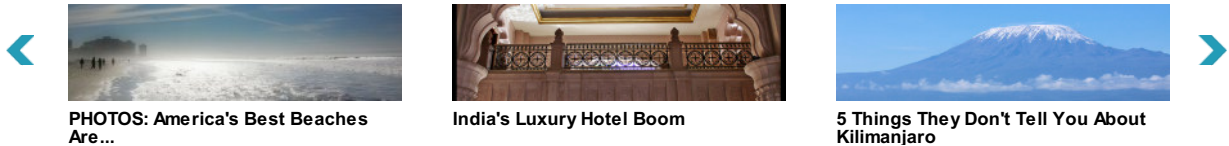


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Embracing The Tenderloin At The Urban Tavern

Posted: 04/16/2012 7:00 am

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The Urban Tavern, serving hearty American cuisine on O'Farrell Street, in San Francisco, is one of the Bay Area's most inviting new restaurants. The space, bistro-casual with rustic ceiling beams and contemporary sculptures in flaming colors is the first sign to passers-by that something's afoot within. Delicious aromas and a party atmosphere, abuzz at 7 p.m. when we arrived, was an irresistible invitation to stay. A couple of questions to the assistant manager Carina Thomas and we learned that the restaurant belongs to the Hilton Hotel next door.



The location, at the foot of Nob Hill, sounds pricey. But the Urban Tavern is in the Tenderloin District, so-named for a rougher decade when labor bosses and crooked politicians controlled the area, demanding choice pay-offs, hence the best cuts of beef. But you don't have to be on the take to slip into one of these faux-leather booths and order a very good meal, at what is --for San Francisco --a reasonable price. After warming up with the customary cocktail, an experimental Cucumber Mint Vodka Martini, I started with a spinach salad tossed with mushrooms, onions, Parmesan cheese and bacon vinaigrette dressing. The dressing wasn't warm -- which I had expected -- but it suited the spinach. My partner ordered the kale Caesar salad made with

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bellwether pepato, white anchovies and foccacia croutons, and he was disappointed. Fond of kale, he thought it a poor match for the Caesar dressing's distinctive flavor.




We also sampled the flavorful, modestly gingery sweet potato ginger soup (\$8) and the fresh steamed mussels (\$13). Pairing our entrees with an Oberon Merlot Napa Valley 2008, we ordered the Whiskey Roast Pork Shoulder and the Fish and Chips (both \$19). The pork roast, tender and juicy, came with four tender, man-size slabs of meat served with pan-roasted squash and brussel sprouts. The fish, farm-raised sturgeon fried in an Anchor Steam Beer batter, was equally generous, with four huge filets tucked into the traditional paper carton. The sturgeon, not often served in restaurants, was delicately mild and not at all fishy. The idea was to taste two entrees, but we could easily have shared one.

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Tempted by the dessert menu but not hungry, we asked for bites of the Shaker Lemon Pie (\$9) and the "cake and ice cream," (\$10) and were surprised by what Joe the waiter brought to the table. The pie, intensely lemony, was filled with the fruit itself, sliced, sugared and baked in a flour crust. The innocuously-named cake-and-ice cream consisted of devils food cake layers filled with milk chocolate cream and a dark chocolate whipped ganache, and vanilla ice cream. We sat in a booth where it was easier to talk over the chatter. But the front-room bar, where customers were watching sports on an overhead screen, was livelier. Another dozen diners were seated family-style at a slab-wood table, sipping cocktails, rubbing elbows and -- as it appeared -- relishing the come-one come-all ambiance.



The Urban Tavern at the Hilton Hotel is at 333 O'Farrell Street in San Francisco. At (415)923-4400.

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