

Taste Test

A beloved breakfast spot makes dinner plans.



By Julia Spalding • Photography By Tony Valainis

There is nothing in **Taste Cafe's** handsome new Matty Bennett–designed interior that feels like the neighborhood drop-in where diners (many sporting baseball caps and elaborate bedheads) used to order omelets and smoothies at the counter and then jockey for prime newspaper-reading spots by the front windows. Those sun-drenched tables have made way for faux-bamboo tabletops, sexy curved banquettes upholstered in buttery woven leather, low amber lighting, and—dare we say it?—a smooth, lounge-y vibe. Is it any surprise that they have even started putting sliced cucumbers in the pitchers of table water?

Owners Marc Urwand and Deidra Henry kept their doors open despite a massive makeover that left the dining room stripped bare for several weeks. Then, in late November, the revamped dining room took on new duties as Taste rolled out its first dinner menu—on select evenings at first, but with plans to add more evenings in the months to come. Ambitious plates of braised lamb shanks and roasted chorizo worked their way into the evening rotation. But the caliber of starters (a warm olive bowl, beef carpaccio with ricotta salata and caper vinaigrette, Camembert en croute, and those same chorizo-stuffed dates with tomato ragu that all the cool kids are eating these days) sets the tone for what to expect: solid, well-prepared food that doesn't have to try too hard. Perfect example: The charcuterie plate has four little mounds of thinly sliced Genoa salami, cappicola, mortadella, and smoked ham that looked like such underachievers when the server sat the plate in the center of our table. But every sliver of meat was a perfect nibble of fat and lean combined, with plenty of coarse mustard and pickled cucumber slices to make it a nice, simple pre-meal snack. Especially when everyone paired their share with one of the well-selected red wines that Taste serves in glass-and-a-half quartino carafes.

Fans of the lunchtime Pear & Roquefort and V-8 know well Taste's mastery of the salad, and the dinner roster lists some equally impressive greenery. In addition to the standard chopped salad and organic field greens, there's an Asian-inspired salad starring crispy squid and edamame, as well as one winner composed of smoked salmon, fennel, apple, and fresh horseradish.

From there, the dinner menu launches into a mini roster of tartines, elaborate knife-and-fork sandwiches (like curry chicken with Granny Smith apples, and paper-thin bresaola with goat cheese, arugula, and truffle oil) that fall somewhere between open-faced and bruschetta. We picked the tartine, layered with slabs of rare roast beef under melting slices of mild Cabrales bleu cheese. The sandwich came with a smear of horseradish, but it was the sweet balsamic onion marmalade that set up the salty flavors of the meat and cheese just so. Kudos to Taste for resisting the temptation to overdo.

Miso-glazed cod presented a thick steak of white fish as moist and flaky as anything you would taste at a fine seafood restaurant. The pulled-pork tinga (the very dish we had heard described by a server as "a traditional Mexican dish") turned out to be a do-it-yourself tortilla featuring a large bowl heaped with tender, peppery meat that had a stealthy heat. We would have given the kitchen extra points had it provided some garnish more inspiring than sour cream, black beans, salsa, and guacamole—but the meat was fine enough to carry the dish on its own. And Taste doesn't put a lot of effort into the friperies of saucing and extra fixings anyway. Instead, it offers a selection of sides to share among the table, everything from braised collards (sweet with smoked bacon) to cauliflower gratin (mercifully, more veg than casserole, with nice browned crowns) to a corn spoon bread (nearly a dessert, and also the spark of a heated debate around the table over the difference between spoon bread and corn pudding, and whose mother made the best).

What does it say about the abundance of good food that our biggest complaint about dinner at Taste was that the new tables are too small to hold all the plates of things we ordered?

Don't worry. No one has messed with the breakfast/brunch menu. The custardy cheddar quiche and pristine bowls of fruit salad with pomegranate seeds haven't gone anywhere. And the garlicky pommes frites still show up in their paper cones, with aioli for dipping. Just like you ordered them back in the day. You just might want to brush your hair before stumbling in for breakfast now.

TASTE CAFE

5164 N. College Ave., 925-2233, tastecafeandmarketplace.com

Hours Monday 8 a.m.–2 p.m.; Tuesday–Friday 7 a.m.–3 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday 8 a.m.–3 p.m.; Wednesday dinner

Cuisine Cafe fare enjoying a night on the town.

Prices Appetizers \$1.50 to \$11; salads \$5.50 to \$8; tartines \$9 to \$12; entrees \$12 to \$20; sides \$4 to \$9

Atmosphere The former sunny cafe has taken the dimmer switch way down and filled its dining room with deep Ralph Lauren colors, lounge-y curved booths, and faux bamboo tabletops.

Pedigree Seasoned executive chefs Marc Urwand and Deidra Henry opened the cafe in 2004 after managing kitchens in New York and Los Angeles. This winter, they remodeled the dining room and added a dinner menu.

Service The staff (who worked only counter service and plate-running during Taste's previous incarnation) have adapted well to waiting tables. Friendly and chatty without interfering, they have clearly studied the lengthy menu and will offer expert suggestions if you're stuck between choices.