



Dining



The bistro's French roasted sirloin with butternut squash gnocchi and Cabernet shallot sauce is seared on the outside for extra flavor

Tiny Eatery, Big Delight

At the Backyard Bistro, two caterers reveal their culinary skill with creative cookery in an intimate setting

By Lynn Hazlewood

I'd heard that eating at the **Backyard Bistro** in Montgomery — a tiny, aptly named restaurant situated behind the chefs' house — is like going to dinner in someone's home. I disagree. And unless your friends set up their dining rooms with separate small tables and have unobtrusive waiters dispensing thoroughly sophisticated food throughout the evening, you'll disagree, too.

Despite its diminutive size, this offshoot of Jerry and Susan Crocker's much-respected catering biz (Holbert's) offers an upscale night out in what was once an office next to their garage. And don't let that description of the space deter you. Creamy white walls stenciled with trees give the room an airy feel. Although there are just six tables, they're well-spaced, so you don't feel squashed — and the chairs are comfortable. It's true that in such a tight room you're at the mercy of your fellow diners when it comes to mood, but the night we went, all tables were occupied by genial boomers, who were enthusiastically chowing down.

Smooth, cool jazz played at a pleasant level, enough to help mute the conversation at neighboring tables but not so loud as to hamper your own. The pleasant staff is well-trained, dishes flow from the kitchen promptly, and — if all goes as smoothly as it did for us — after a well-paced meal you'll find yourself magically ready to leave just as the next diners who want your table show up at the door. Pulling that off several times a night takes clever choreography.

But enough about ambiance and efficiency. The food! The menu, which changes monthly, is "bistro" in the contemporary rather than the traditional sense, so you get modern versions of favorite dishes, with seasonal produce a driving force.

My spouse, who seems to be on a mission to compare calamari across the region, ordered the bistro fried version here. Torn between two other tantalizing appetizers — the chanterelle mushroom pizza with hazelnut mascarpone and caramelized onions, and the beet ravioli with butternut squash filling — I did what any thinking person would do and ordered both.

The wine list is carefully chosen and fairly priced, and there's a welcome selection of half bottles. We went for a 2005 California Cabernet Sauvignon from J. Lohr Seven Oaks, which at \$14 for the half bottle was a good choice as well as a good deal.

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After we'd ordered, a server delivered an amuse bouche: an inside-out tuna maki roll crowned with a dollop of white soy and ginger foam. Two mouthfuls (if you do it right), it was fabulously briny and flavorful. Our bouches were certainly amused, and our expectations raised by such an auspicious start. Bread included a white focaccia and a very tasty, chewy Gorgonzola bread that we found more satisfying without the accompanying chickpea dip.

Food comes handsomely presented on white dishes of various shapes and sizes — a dash of modern simplicity that shows care without being precious.

The calamari expert declared Jerry Crocker's version very fine; succulent with a light, yet crunchy batter and no trace of oiliness, so you knew the creature began life in the sea. There was plenty of it, too, both rings and crispy tentacles. The sweet lime juice dip was



The cozy restaurant, a former office in what was once the owners' garage, has just six tables

intense, so a little went a long way. In theory, the dish is a simple bistro standard, but this rendition is a reminder of what chefs should be shooting for.

A flatbread-style pizza crust about seven inches in diameter came topped with a generous layer of sautéed chanterelles whose wonderfully earthy flavor was set off by the sweet caramelized onions and hint of nuttiness from the mascarpone. I wasn't crazy about the crust, but the topping was memorable. The beet ravioli was as beautiful to look at as it was delightful to make disappear. Deep red pasta parcels enclosed a thin, rich layer of butternut squash filling; the cream, made with goat's milk and finished with chèvre, had a slight tang that came as a pleasant surprise.

My entrée, French roasted sirloin with Cabernet shallot sauce, was done to a turn, seared on the outside for extra flavor, with just enough rich sauce to beef up each bite. There's a tendency these days for reductions so intense they dominate the plate, but this was nuanced and just right. The butternut squash gnocchi accompaniment was a touch heavy (squash tends to soak up the flour), but it was tasty anyway.

Sage-roasted duck and confit with braised red cabbage was a truly delicious study in contrasts. The duck had a hint of sweet gaminess; the hearty portion of breast was perfectly pink, and the confit-style leg was crisp on the outside and moist within, delivering precisely the mix of textures this combination is designed to provide. A couple of asparagus spears were

au point, but the braised red cabbage seemed slightly over-vinegared... just one low tone in an evening of high notes.

We watched as a neighboring diner tucked into Jerry Crocker's signature dish — pan-seared scallops in a potato basket — that he declared was as mouthwatering as it looked. It's on the list for our next visit.

Desserts (made by Susan Crocker) offer more examples of creative twists: bread pudding becomes pumpkin Drambuie bread pudding with chai tea sauce; classic cheesecake gets a lift from pomegranates; cardamom ice cream enlivens apple and pear upside-down cake.

The crème brûlée's happy addition was chocolate mocha ganache lying in delicious wait at the bottom of the bowl. The shiny caramelized glaze was as expected, but the creamy custard was more mousse-like than usual and blended silkily with the molten chocolate beneath. We tucked in with such gusto that the fellow who'd had the scallops remarked on how good it must be.

When it's warm, you can have a cocktail or eat outside in the courtyard. But in any weather, this bijou bistro is proof of the old adage that the best things come in small packages. ♦

Backyard Bistro Lunch Tuesday through Friday, dinner Tuesday through Saturday. Closed Sunday and Monday. Appetizers range from \$6-\$12; entrées \$10-\$28; desserts are \$6 or \$7.
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