

Picán gives Southern dishes California twist

Michael Bauer

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There's something exciting happening with Southern food in the Bay Area, and a lot of that excitement is encapsulated at Picán in Oakland. Dean Dupuis, who was chef at South City Kitchen in Atlanta for many years, has relocated west and is giving a California twist to traditional dishes.

So what, exactly, does that mean?

How about a fairly traditional Caesar (\$9), topped with rings of fried okra and crisp nuggets of creamy fried grits standing in for croutons? His shrimp and grits (\$13) is accented with organic arugula; his cucumber salad with cider vinaigrette (\$8) is sprinkled with sheep's milk feta. He's even trademarked his California Collards (\$6), which are organic and are sauteed so they have more character and a brighter flavor than traditional preparations.

The restaurant is helping make Oakland's emerging Uptown District a dining destination, with Ozumo next door, Luka's Taproom across the street and Flora nearby. Farley's, the pioneering Potrero Hill coffeehouse, recently opened its first branch a block away.

Picán fits seamlessly into the tableau. It's owned by Michael LeBlanc, a founder of Brothers Brewing Co. and veteran business executive, including being president of Polaroid Asia-Pacific. This is his first restaurant, and he works the room like a lobbyist at a cocktail party in Sacramento, moving from table to table to chat up diners. He's instilled that same Southern graciousness in his staff members, who welcome each diner at the door like a favorite uncle; the treatment continues until patrons are out the door and are greeted cheerfully by the doorman.

At times, however, waiters can act a little like that precocious nephew trying to get attention; others are more subdued but they're generally in-your-face friendly, a style embraced by many of the well-dressed patrons who fill the handsome 120-seat dining room.

A modern look

LeBlanc put together the entire concept, located on the first floor of the Broadway Grand condominium project. It's a modern space, with 22-foot ceilings and the now-ubiquitous open ceiling and open kitchen. San Francisco designer Tonya Bellusci and Bellusci Design have used such things as crown molding, a dropped tin ceiling and fabrics at the floor-to-ceiling windows to reference the antebellum south. It's a

seamless blend of old and new that dovetails with the food.

LeBlanc says he looked at dozens of chefs before he found one who got his concept. Dupuis is taking up the challenge, freed from Southern restraints by the Bay Area culinary culture. The menu features 10 small plates, including soups and salads, and eight main courses along with seven sides (all \$6) that include the trademark collards, his peanut and jalapeno slaw, and Carolina plantation Hoppin' John.

Dupuis knows when to embellish and when to stick with the tried-and-true in such specialties as the Charleston she-crab soup (\$10), a classic bisque. The velvety bisque is punctuated with sherry and loads of fresh grated nutmeg that slightly overpowered the delicate crab, but that really didn't matter because the soup was exceptional.

The chef also does an updated version of shrimp and grits, sizing it for an appetizer portion and arranging the seafood precisely on the plate, with the shrimp arching over small mounds of grits, arugula and drizzles of Worcestershire garlic gravy.

Southern foie gras (\$11) consists of gooey fried chicken livers with bacon, scallions and a sweet onion marsala gravy, served on toast. The livers were both creamy and crunchy, but the flavor was diminished by too-generous hand with the too-sweet sauce.

On the other hand, pan-roasted sea scallops (\$14) celebrate the star ingredient. The two browned coins are centered on a melange of peas, hominy and curls of pink crawfish tails, moistened with a restrained amount of truffle brown butter, adding an earthy but not overpowering background note.

Chicken isn't cheap

If fried chicken shows up on a menu I can't resist, even though just about every time I see buttermilk in the mix I'm mildly disappointed. Most of the time it means the coating falls off the flesh and tends to be mushy. Not so here.

The chicken (\$23), which takes three days from start to finish, is first brined, which ensures succulence, then is soaked in buttermilk and breaded; its beautifully crisp coating clings to the moist flesh. Dupuis serves it with smoked Gouda macaroni and cheese, bubbling in a small cast iron skillet next to the breast and drumstick. I loved it and longed for the wing. However, we could discuss whether \$23 is a fair price because the waiter is quick to point out that you need to order the collards (\$6) to round it out. That brings the dish up to \$29. Just for comparison, at Farmer Brown in San Francisco you get the same thing for \$16.95.

Dupuis also does pecan- and hickory-smoked barbecued pork ribs (\$25); the meat is excellent and falling-off-the-bone tender, but the molasses barbecue sauce dominates. The tangy peanut and green cabbage slaw spiked with jalapeno is a pleasant and much-needed foil.

Pan-seared corvina with blue crab (\$24) shows Dupuis at his best. The beautifully presented dish starts with a dense knob of roasted garlic grits surrounded by a grilled asparagus salad. The long shards are infused with citrus vinaigrette, so strong the vegetable seemed almost pickled and contrasted wonderfully with the meaty fish. Dupuis also shows his mettle with the bourbon and molasses lacquered duck (\$24)

that comes with the trademarked collards, a rich sauce and a too-dense cheddar fritter.

Picán probably isn't the best place for a vegetable plate (\$17), a pile of too-dry mashed potatoes, grilled asparagus that tasted as if they were sharing the same grill with the black-pepper-crusting salmon (\$23), and the star - cornmeal battered and fried green tomatoes.

A few stumbles

The kitchen also stumbled on the grilled rib-eye (\$31), although it might have been good if it had been warm and not drowned in a smoked garlic aioli. The accompanying scallion and sweet potato salad was starchy and harshly spiced, creating a dish that didn't work on any level.

Dessert also was mixed, although no one should pass up the root beer float (\$8) made with sassafras ice cream and a cap of whipped cream, or the Georgia pecan tart (\$10) that the menu points out is large enough to share; it's served with buttermilk ice cream and bourbon butterscotch.

However, the peach fried pie (\$8) didn't have enough sweetness and the fruit seemed meager; the lemon buttermilk chess pie (\$8) tasted as if the local blueberries were frozen and thawed, and the dark chocolate bread pudding (\$8) was dry and didn't spotlight the main ingredient. The banana pudding (\$8) was served in one of those small bowls you see in a cafeteria, with a few slices of banana on top and vanilla wafers; it was fine, but seemed overpriced.

Yet even at its young age, Picán has become part of the fabric of an emerging neighborhood. Its appeal extends far beyond the food. It's a place to relax, toast friends and families over a bourbon cocktail, and bask in the glow of Southern hospitality.

Picán

2295 Broadway (at 23rd Street), Oakland

(510) 834-1000 or

picanrestaurant.com

Brunch 10:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Sunday, lunch 11:30 a.m.-2 p.m. Monday-Friday, dinner 5-10 p.m. Monday-Thursday, until 11 p.m. Friday-Saturday, 4-9 p.m. Sunday. Full bar. Reservations and credit cards accepted. Street parking, moderately difficult

Overall: Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS

Food: Rating: TWO STARS

Service: Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS

Atmosphere: Rating: THREE STARS

Prices: \$\$\$ (Expensive; most entrees \$18-\$24)

Noise rating: Noise Rating: FOUR BELLS Can only talk in raised voices (75-80 decibels)

Pluses: Handsome decor blends traditional and modern styles; service exudes Southern hospitality. Some excellent Southern dishes, often with a gentle California twist. Try the Southern Caesar, shrimp and grits, fried chicken, covina and root beer float. Excellent bourbon selection.

Minuses: At times the kitchen can lose control, so some dishes may be over- or under-seasoned; other dishes may come out lukewarm.

Rating: FOUR STARS Extraordinary Rating: THREE STARS Excellent Rating: TWO STARS Good Rating: ONE STAR Fair Noise Rating: BOMB Poor

The wine list

When you sit in the dining room and see the expanse of wall filled with a lighted shadow box displaying 21 bourbons, you'll get a hint of what this restaurant is about.

Because Picán serves Southern food, it stands to reason that it should celebrate the region's premier spirit. Bourbon infuses many of the drinks and is a great accompaniment to the food; in fact, the restaurant periodically hosts bourbon and food matching dinners. However on our visits, the impressive list, which features nearly 100 selections, was never offered.

What diners do get is a wine and cocktail list that includes 1-ounce flights of bourbon, including 15-, 20- and 23-year-old Pappy Van Winkel (\$65). Most cocktails are \$9 to \$11, and include the classic Sazerac (\$10) and a Tennessee margarita (\$9) with Jack Daniel's, Cointreau, lime and agave nectar.

The wines are good, too, but less interesting than the spirits. The 70 selections span the globe and are made up of unusual and supermarket-style brands that will please a wide range of diners. Nearly 30 wines are offered by the glass, including several ports and excellent dessert wines such as the 2007 Jackson Triggs Vidal Ice Wine (\$7.50/\$41) and the 2004 Beringer Nightengale (\$11.50/\$58). Markups generally tend to the high side.

If you bring your own wine, corkage is \$15.

Ratings key

FOUR STARS = Extraordinary; THREE STARS = Excellent; TWO STARS = Good; ONE STAR = Fair; NO STARS = Poor

\$ = Inexpensive: entrees \$10 and under; \$\$ = Moderate: \$11-\$17; \$\$\$ = Expensive: \$18-\$24; \$\$\$\$ = Very Expensive: more than \$25

ONE BELL = Pleasantly quiet (less than 65 decibels); TWO BELLS = Can talk easily (65-70); THREE BELLS = Talking normally gets difficult (70-75); FOUR BELLS = Can talk only in raised voices (75-80); BOMB = Too noisy for normal conversation (80+)

Prices are based on main courses. When entrees fall between these categories, the prices of appetizers

help determine the dollar ratings. Chronicle critics make every attempt to remain anonymous. All meals are paid for by The Chronicle. Star ratings are based on a minimum of three visits. Ratings are updated continually based on at least one revisit.

Reviewers: Michael Bauer (M.B.), Tara Duggan (T.D.), Mandy Erickson (M.E.), Amanda Gold (A.G.), Miriam Morgan (M.M.), Carol Ness (C.N.), Karola Saekel (K.M.S.) and Carey Sweet (C.S.)

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/07/05/FDOP18BGBC.DTL>

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