

San Francisco Chronicle Magazine

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EPIC PORTIONS, EPIC PRICES AT KULETO'S ROASTHOUSE

For Pat Kuleto, "epic" is an accurate description of his challenges in building two restaurants — Epic Roasthouse and Waterbar — on a sliver of Port of San Francisco land overlooking the Bay Bridge. It was a \$27 million project that took five years to come to fruition.

For diners, "epic" describes the feeling you get entering the restaurant and taking in the view, then getting walloped in the wallet after paying the bill. Main courses range from \$21 to \$54, and most of the time you'll want to order a vegetable or two at \$9 a pop.

Is it worth the price? It depends.

If you're a hedonist who loves to be pampered, appreciates excellent New Orleans-inspired steakhouse fare prepared by celebrity chef Jan Birnbaum and revels in the spectacular view of the bridge and surrounding bay, I'd say yes. One look outside affirms why we all pay the exorbitant tab to live in the Bay Area.

If you're an ascetic who constantly compares what you get at the nearby Slanted Door to what you can get at a dive on Larkin Street, then you may want to head to the Palace Steakhouse.

Dining at Epic Roasthouse is an event, but not for the faint of appetite. The menu is designed to hit every conceivable taste: crudo, salumi, salads, hearty soups, steaks, chops and more chops. It also offers just about everything you'd find in a seafood house, including Dungeness crab and wood oven-roasted whole fish (\$29).

I would definitely come back again — where else can you find this view? — although I have quibbles with a few things.

One is the design. I think Kuleto may have veered a little too far to the



Disney side of things by creating an interior that is supposed to evoke the feel of a pump station, with specially crafted pipes and a huge wheel that dominates the center.

Kuleto, who has designed more than 100 restaurants — including San Francisco's Boulevard, Farallon and Jardiniere — focuses on every detail, such as the massive pipes that looked chipped but were specially manufactured for the restaurant, and the huge rusted-metal fireplace that completes the industrial feel of this

120-seat interior. The restaurant also includes a handsome 35-seat lounge on the mezzanine, an outdoor space overlooking the waterfront for 65 and a private room for 60.

At Epic, Kuleto is trying to echo the past and form a relationship between it and Waterbar a few yards south. (Waterbar opened at the same time; I'll review it next week.) It's his interpretation of how the water pump station might have helped save the city during the 1906 earthquake, while Waterbar, with its two circular 1,500-gallon floor-to-ceiling fish

tanks, would have been the "distribution center."

The staff can explain all this, but it might have been nicer to have a cleaner look and let the scenic attributes carry the design. To see the moon ascend over the Bay Bridge while sitting at one of the crystal-set tables with comfortable leather chairs makes everything else seem like distracting window dressing.

However, the weighty look of the space, which includes the rough

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timber ceiling, rusty-looking air ducts and a see-through metal grid separating the wine rack and the upstairs lounge, certainly has the rustic heft to go with Birnbaum's food. He's a guy who hails from Louisiana, where he worked with Paul Prudhomme, and spent a decade as the chef-owner of Catahoula in Calistoga. It's little wonder he chose a steakhouse theme and that everything on the menu,

including the salads, have earthy, bold flavors.

Birnbaum treats the romaine salad (\$10) like the classic iceberg wedge. The head is quartered and topped with croutons and a bold anchovy dressing that's been pounded in a mortar and pestle to enhance its flavor and texture. The warm spinach salad (\$13) is equality audacious, with bacon and pickled onions and a poached duck egg nestled in the greens; unfortunately, the egg was about 2 degrees from being hard boiled, so there was no runny yolk to meld, tame and enrich the combination.

He adds loads of spice to clam chowder (demitasse, \$5; cup, \$7; bowl, \$12), studded with bell peppers, with thin cheese crisps on the side. Subtlety isn't in the repertoire, whether it's shrimp remoulade (\$14) with both a mustard sauce and a tartar sauce, escargot (\$16) served in a copper pan covered with a thin layer of custard dominated by the anise taste of Herbsaint, or even the fat spears of asparagus (\$9) that soak up the smoke of the wood fire like a sponge. The 14 side

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KATY RADDATZ

The wine list

Nicole Burke, who is generally on the floor at Epic Roasthouse, has crafted an impressive array of wines that concentrate on California but don't leave out the best of the rest.

The 20-page list — which has 25 wines by the glass and by the “splash,” and 39 half bottles — is laid out in a consumer-friendly way. Many sections have bottles or varietals highlighted with a description; one section, called “Epic Prospects,” describes 10 wines that are relatively unfamiliar.

Markups are fair considering the scope of the list and the service. Value wines include the 2005 Stephen Vincent Crimson Syrah Blend for \$24 and the 2005 Argiolas Costera Isola dei Nuraghi Grenache from Italy for \$33.

Burke and her crew are great at making suggestions and staying within the customer's budget.

The restaurant has excellent after-dinner wines, spirits and cocktails, including one of the best sidecars (\$10) around and originals such as the Gatsby (\$12), with Blanton's Bourbon, Barolo Chinato, vermouth and burnt orange, from bar chef Camber Lay.

If you bring your own wine, corkage is \$25 with a two-bottle limit per reservation. — M.B.

EPIC ROASTHOUSE

369 Embarcadero (at Folsom), San Francisco; (415) 369-9955 or epicroasthousesf.com.

Lunch 11:30 a.m.-2 p.m. Monday-Friday; brunch 11 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Saturday-Sunday; dinner 5-10:30 p.m. nightly. Full bar. Reservations and credit cards accepted. Some street parking at night. Valet \$10 at dinner; \$12 at lunch.

Overall: ★★★

Food: ★★★

Service: ★★★

Atmosphere: ★★★½

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

Noise rating: ♫♫♫♫

Can talk only in raised voices
(75-80 decibels)

★★★★ Extraordinary ★★★ Excellent
★★ Good ★ Fair □ Poor

See sfgate.com for complete ratings key



FOR A 360-DEGREE

view of the restaurant,
visit sfgate.com/food.

dishes also include ember-roasted baked potato (\$10), and macaroni and cheese (\$9), truffled cauliflower (\$9) and green beans amandine (\$9).

Even the seafood takes a hearty turn on the grill, followed by a dip into rich sauce. Tai snapper (\$29), for example, gets a lift from the wood fire and is gilded with lemon chile broth and shrimp, rounded out by a pyramid of harissa couscous and escarole.

The waiters are well trained in tableside service and do a magnificent job boning the fish and presenting the dishes. While the restaurant could easily seem corporate and impersonal, the staff combines a welcoming air with laid-back New Orleans style and efficiency. Still, at times they aren't versed in the menu, not knowing the cheeses or cookies, for example, and they often forget to tell guests about the chocolate souffle (\$10) that takes 20 minutes to prepare.

Ask them about steak, however, and they can pontificate like cattle barons talking about breeding stock. Beef is the core of this modern steakhouse menu.

The 20-ounce New York strip (\$46) gets the full Birnbaum treatment, rubbed with coriander, black pepper and coffee beans and then placed on the specially made 72-inch grill with big wheels on either side to lower or raise the meat over the fire. It



Chef/co-owner Jan Birnbaum pours fudge sauce over a Scharffen Berger chocolate souffle.

sits opposite the huge wood-burning oven that produces many appetizers and main courses. The steak is served with Brussels sprouts, leeks and other vegetables mounded on top, along with a bordelaise sauce, which also accompanies the 26-ounce porterhouse steak (\$54), from Coleman Ranch in Colorado, that's dry aged for 28 days. It's garnished with cipollini onions and grilled fennel.

The star, however, is the prime rib, which is only offered until 8 p.m. It should be a real incentive to fill up those early seats. Many diners expect this cut to be butter-tender but mild-tasting. At Epic, however, it's pleasantly chewy, as if coming from cattle allowed to roam and build muscle and meaty depth of flavor. It's available in 10-ounce (\$33) and 14-ounce cuts (\$42) served with freshly grated horseradish sauce.

It's a challenge to save room for dessert (all \$10), but you may want to pace yourself, especially if you're a

fan of New Orleans' Cafe du Monde beignets. Just tell yourself you're having breakfast so you can enjoy the puffy sugared doughnuts served with a small glass of Bicerin cafe au lait.

Brown butter enriches an almond cake with toffee sauce and blood orange curd, and molasses brown sugar creme fraiche “lightens” slices of bread pudding with a Van Winkle bourbon sauce. Of course, you can restrict yourself to the sorbets and granita that change nightly, or a rich cup of Caffe Vita coffee that follows the restaurant's theme of offering the best artisan products.

You'll leave knowing you've had the whole Epic experience, including a \$19 million view.

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