

BY MICHAEL BAUER

Classic American fare, fair prices at the Presidio Social Club

Red drums at the entrance of the Presidio Social Club, like the name itself, conjure images of the past. It doesn't take much imagination to see a woman in a crimson polka-dot dress and perfectly coiffed '40s hair taking a turn on the dance floor with the enlisted men.

It doesn't matter that this new restaurant in the Presidio began its life more than a century ago as an enlisted men's barracks, and that the soldiers would have been escorted to the stockade if a woman was caught inside. The nice thing about fantasies is that they adapt well to embellishment, and because of its history, the restaurant helps fuel those flames.

The low-slung clapboard building with a wide veranda set amid eucalyptus trees and expanses of grass looks much as it must have in its prime. The inside also has some recognizable retro elements, although designer Olle Lundberg (who created the interior of Slanted Door) has added modern touches, such as elongated clear filament pendant lights suspended from the open-beamed ceiling, and cold-rolled steel accent pieces. The white walls make the row of paned windows along the front stand out, revealing the lawn and the Letterman Digital Arts Center beyond.

A private room for 30 can be screened off by panels of opaque glass behind the host stand. The long marble bar stretches the length of the dining room backed by what looks like old stainless-steel medical cases that hold bottles, creating a clean backdrop for expert bartenders who mix drinks for patrons sucking down \$5 margaritas and other classic cocktails.

A beautiful communal table made out of a slab of tree trunk with a hole in the middle makes a great conversation



The Presidio Social Club is housed in a former men's barracks at the Presidio.

piece, and is an ideal place for parties or for singles who want to make new friends. The staff reinforces this clubby, neighborhood ambience. While some are young and seemingly inexperienced, they have such a friendly attitude that it's hard to let minor missteps such as bringing the wrong drink or forgetting to bring utensils detract from the overall positive vibe.

Even though it opened only three months ago, Presidio Social Club has already become a local gathering place, which is a feat for a place in a chunk of government land that's just being developed. Early in the evening, the 120 seats are filled with families and children, followed by the decidedly older and affluent Presidio and Pacific Heights set who live nearby. Around

8:30, younger spirits, many from the Marina, take over, and the place feels as if it had been airlifted from Cow Hollow's Bermuda Triangle.

The food is familiar enough to bridge all these palates. It's strictly American, with nods to San Francisco, crafted by owners Ray Tang and his wife, Shawn Kearney-Tang. The couple developed a cult-like following at their tiny Mariposa restaurant in Windsor. Now they've more than quadrupled the seats in an iconic space steeped in history.

The layout of the menu looks like a cross between what you'd find in a Parisian brasserie and an all-American diner, with categories called Hors d'Oeuvres; Soups; Sides; Salads; Club Specialties; and Seafood, Chops &

Fowl. The dessert menu is printed in Victorian display type.

The macaroni 'n' cheese (\$15) is singled out, written in bold caps and set off in a box; obviously it's something the Tangs want diners to see. The thick slab comes with a mottled, golden brown top and creamy layers of pasta and three cheeses. It really is worth ordering, and it could have been even better if the kitchen had salted the pasta a little more before assembling and baking the dish.

Mac and cheese epitomizes the strength and weaknesses in the kitchen — some dishes are memorable and others could use tweaking, but prices are so good that even if they don't knock each dish out of Crissy Field, diners won't feel cheated. After all,



Above: Gruyere cheese toasts with fondue tomato dip; below right, veteran pastry chef Phil Ogiela's banana cream pie.

PRESIDIO SOCIAL CLUB

563 Ruger St. (near Lombard Gate, in the Presidio), San Francisco; (415) 885-1888.

Dinner 5:30-10 p.m. Monday-Thursday, until 10:30 p.m. Friday-Saturday. Full bar. Reservations and credit cards accepted. Free lot and easy street parking.

| | |
|--------------|--------|
| Overall | ★★½ |
| Food | ★★½ |
| Service | ★★ |
| Atmosphere | ★★½ |
| Prices | \$\$\$ |
| Noise Rating | 🔊🔊🔊 |

Pluses: Often excellent American food, particularly good classic desserts. Reasonable cocktail and food prices. The modern interior makes gentle nods to the past.

Minuses: Only a few items on the menu don't resonate. Service could be sharpened a bit.

RATINGS KEY

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

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

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

🔊 Pleasantly quiet (less than 65 decibels)
 🔊🔊 Can talk easily (65-70)
 🔊🔊🔊 Talking normally gets difficult (70-75)
 🔊🔊🔊🔊 Can talk only in raised voices (75-80)
 🔊🔊🔊🔊🔊 Too noisy for normal conversation (80+)

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.



you can get a margarita for \$5, most appetizers for less than \$10 and main courses for \$14 to \$19, with the exception of the bone-in rib-eye steak for two. That's \$28 a person, but after seeing the brontosaurus-like slab of meat pass by the table one night, I knew it was in my future.

Before serving it, the waiter presents the 1½-inch-thick steak for viewing and then takes it back to the kitchen, where it's sliced and served with a choice of mashed potatoes or fries, spinach or other vegetables. It was very good, but when you can get the even better flat-iron steak topped with peppercorn butter for \$19, it seems a bit overpriced.

For those in a more casual mood, there's a Sloppy Joe made with Kobe beef rib and sweet-tangy sauce, served with cold slaw and fries. Again, the \$15 price tag seems like a lot for this humble sandwich.

While I was disappointed in the flabby liver and onions (\$15), the somewhat greasy pasta topped with "Chinatown Roast Duck" (\$14) and the overwhelming plethora of chunky cucumbers that didn't blend with the greens in the chopped salad with green goddess dressing (\$8), I was more than satisfied with the escarole and endive mix (\$9) tossed with a warm bacon vinaigrette and topped with a fried egg. It's a salad worth coming back for.

Another appetizer worth repeat visits is the Gruyere cheese toasts (\$8). The dish is made up of bite-size grilled cheese sandwiches accompanied by a small bowl of tomato soup, which the menu calls "fondue tomato dip."

If you're passionate about Jewish deli fare, head for the chopped liver (\$5), a chunky mound of creamy chicken innards with hard-cooked eggs, served with warm toasted rye bread. And although "Cannibal Sandwich" (\$9) may not conjure the most appetizing images, the steak tartare spread on toast puts other versions to shame; it's carefully seasoned to enhance but not overpower the natural flavors.

The seafood cocktail combo (\$11) had the opposite problem — the shrimp and crab were overpowered by the sauce described on the menu as "Mission Taqueria Style with tomato juice, avocados, chiles and lime." It's an interesting idea that sounds better than it tastes. The Dungeness crab "cupcakes" (\$8) look like three little muffins and have a somewhat dry, stale flavor. Again, the idea was more appealing than the execution.

Yet those awkward dishes are balanced by many others, especially main courses, that made me forget about the failures. Grilled Idaho trout (\$17) pays homage to wharf-side restaurants; the fish is served with a simple almond brown butter that integrates all the elements.

The "Award Winning Pork" (\$17) — the chef won a national cooking contest with this dish in 2002 — consists of thin slices of meat next to an oyster hash that has a chewy quality, as if all the browned bits of rice were scraped from the bottom of the pan and put on the plate; it makes a dynamic contrast to the succulent pork.

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Alluring cocktails highlight Social Club's beverage list

The clutches of people hanging out at the long marble bar and the nostalgic vibe of the Presidio Social Club put diners in the mood for a classic cocktail. And when you can get a well-made \$5 margarita with Highland Silver Tequila, Cointreau and fresh lime, you can be sure the drink will be in demand.

In fact, most cocktails, while on the small side, are in the \$7 to \$8 range, which can be considered a bargain when compared with prices at other

restaurants. Many diners also gravitate to the sidecar (\$7), the French 75 made with Cognac, Champagne and fresh lemon (\$8) or my favorite, the Hoop La (\$6), with Lillet and brandy.

The 39-item wine list, which offers a good variety of styles, weights and prices, is fine with the food, though the markup tends to be on the high side. Prices for whites start at \$22 for the 2005 Las Brisas from Spain, rising to \$55 for the 2005 Sonoma Cutrer "The Cutrer"

Chardonnay. In reds, \$28 will buy the 2005 Alamos Malbec from Argentina; prices run up to \$85 for the 2003 Volker Eisele Cabernet Sauvignon. Although the menu is strictly American, the wine selection leans toward imports, probably because prices are lower.

If diners don't want an entire bottle, five white and five red wines are offered by the glass, carafe or bottle. If you bring your own wine, corkage is \$15.

—M.B.