

Retro Tweak

Technique-driven comfort foods at the new Sobo Café

by Tracey Middlekauff



GIL JAWETZ

Smoky chicken salad at the new Sobo Café

“We just believe in serving simple good food emphasizing good techniques and ingredients, and not ego or showmanship,” says Timothy Dyson, head chef at Federal Hill’s Sobo Café. This philosophy was evident at a recent re-opening party showcasing the restaurant’s new direction under owner Anna Leventis, who purchased the café last fall. Once a popular neighborhood favorite, the spot had fallen on hard times. “I gave careful consideration on how to retain some of the old feel,” she says, “while freshening up and putting my own touch on the new SoBo.”

The food at the re-opening party—all of which is currently available on the regular menu—was tweaked retro comfort food, something Dyson refers to as “trashy chic.” The cocktail appetizer platter, for example, consists of lamb meatballs with a fun jalapeno mint jelly and pastry-wrapped duck sausage, or “duckies in a blanket,” kicked up with a cherry horseradish mustard. “That’s one of my favorite dishes from a creative aspect,” Dyson says.



The buttery pastry that encases the duck is house-made by Patrick Grammens, formerly of Bluegrass. In fact, all of the breads and pastries at SoBo are homemade, a nice bit of attention to detail that makes a huge difference in the final product. “It’s too easy for chefs to overlook the baking and pastry side of things,” Dyson says. “But it’s so important!”

Chicken salad is often a forgettable, throwaway item, but here it’s a standout: smoky and juicy, thanks to the use of both light and dark meats. The fresh, homemade bun doesn’t hurt, either. (Be advised that it’s only available at the lunch and brunch services, which Dyson says “kick ass.”) So, too, the smoked salmon rilette with goat cheese is elevated by the crispy homemade crostini upon which it perches.

The chicken pot pie, which I sampled on a return visit to the café, continues this theme of retro-done-right. Loaded with shredded chicken and chunks of potatoes and peas, it’s kind of like your mom used to make—if, that is, your mom always made her own well-seasoned chicken stock and flaky pastry from scratch.

The macaroni and cheese is anchored with a creamy béchamel, and topped with a perfectly crunchy panko crust. Studded with bits of tomato, it’s gooey and cheesy and thick and everything a proper mac and cheese should be. My only complaint about this dish is that it’s listed as an appetizer, but it’s quite generous and could easily make a filling entree.

But not all of the dishes are classic Americana. Take the tangy and tender “Carolina style” chicken carnitas. The only downside to this dish were the accompanying cheese pupusas, which were a bit dry, but they made a good base for a nice pile of that smoky meat and piquant pickled cabbage.



The spinach and eggplant stuffed peppers with feta, mushroom, tomato ragout, and orzo draws on Dyson's experience at Meli, and, he says, Leventis's Greek heritage. The dish also highlights another thing that SoBo does well: vegetarian food that goes beyond the dreaded grilled vegetable plate. Other veggie options include a mushroom flatbread and a squash curry entree with an anise scented rice cake, lentils, and coconut milk.

New menu items will be rotated in bi-seasonally, according to Dyson, but don't expect anything too trendy to pop up. "We're not sticking something fancy on a plate just for the sake of it," Dyson says. But don't worry: Dyson says there will always be a place on the menu for the pot pie and mac and cheese.

Judging from the packed house on a recent weekend, this honest approach to cooking is something that diners can really get behind. "This is the kind of food I like to cook," Dyson says. "It is food I can feel good about serving, and I believe this town needs more of."