

Food

Canyon Bistro – Where Jazz and Fine Food Meet in Topanga

By Dan and Edie Irwin

One of the first things to go when the economy rearranged our finances was eating out...other than the occasional splurge at Hamburger Habit in Woodland Hills, we have not gone out to dinner for a while. Recently, though, with a slight uptick in business, an unexpected tax refund, and a birthday to celebrate, we decided to make a night of it. Still wary of high babysitting costs, we decided to keep it local and join some friends who were getting together at Canyon Bistro to dine and enjoy live jazz on the patio.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF LARRY COHN

We arrived early on a Friday night to avoid the crowd, which can be large on jazz nights. Our waiter, Nigel, who is also the manager, welcomed us and made us feel right at home, and throughout the night the staff was attentive but unobtrusive. We started with some appetizers. Being a duck lover, I could not resist the Pulled Duck in Lettuce Wraps (\$11). I expected a small portion of duck, and was pleasantly surprised when a substantial portion of shredded soy-ginger duck arrived with an assortment of Asian influenced vegetables, plenty for a light dinner. Wrap the duck and vegetables in lettuce leaves for a delightful mix of flavors and textures. For vegetarians, this dish, as well as several others, is also available with tempeh in place of the meat. Next up came the Fried Calamari (\$11), which was excellent—crisp on the outside, cooked perfectly inside, not a trace of the rubbery texture one so often gets with this dish. Served in a large paper cone with a Cajun remoulade on the side, it was perfect, and more than enough for four of us to share. Next up were the fries. I had had them a few times before (my nine-year-old daughter likes to stop in on weekends for fries and an Orangina, a great and affordable way to enjoy some quality Topanga Time), and they did not disappoint. We tried the regular, truffled, and sweet potato fries, all served in large portions in the trademark paper cone basket. All were wonderful, with the sweet potato fries getting particular raves. At the next table, one of our party had the Grilled Artichoke (\$10), which she said was the best she had



Seared yellow-fin tuna tartine comes with avocado, pesto, roasted tomato vinaigrette and crostini with a side of the Bistro's mouth-watering fries.

ever had, and another thoroughly enjoyed the Wild Mushroom Ravioli (\$9 or \$17, depending on size). All this was accompanied by several glasses of good wine (available by the bottle or glass) from their small but wide-ranging selection. They also have an excellent and eclectic beer menu.

We decided to leave the rest of the appetizer menu for another time (the Yellowfin Tuna Tartare (\$12) looks particularly enticing). After sharing a beautifully presented and tasty chopped salad made from local, sustainable ingredients, it was time to try the main courses, and they were superb. I had the Organic Shetland Ocean Trout (\$28), which is sustainably farm-raised in Nova Scotia. It was much like salmon but with a lighter, more delicate flavor, cooked to perfection with crust of crispy skin and complimented by a mild basil sauce. A mélange of fresh vegetables balanced out the experience.

My wife and a friend shared a steak special, Top Cap of Ribeye (\$35), an uncommon cut of meat which we had never had before. It too, was cooked perfectly, tender and full of flavor, served with spinach and an intense homemade side steak sauce. Dessert was a mixed berry cobbler that was so good our friends at the next table had to order extras for their kids.

And then there was the jazz. Performed on the outdoor patio on a beautiful Topanga evening, it was a mellow blend of keyboards, sax, electric bass, guitar and vocals. Hosted by the owner of Canyon Bistro, Larry Cohn on keyboard (who played and composed professionally before going into the restaurant business), and performed by a dynamic group of musicians, the music was a festive mixture of jazz standards and jazzy pop that was unobtrusive to conversation, but certainly

provided plenty of moments to stop and admire the virtuosity of the playing. It also featured Leslie Smith, an exceptional vocalist who simply stood, hand in pocket and sang as effortlessly as we breathe. Everything contributed to a lively adult atmosphere that was also friendly to our friends' two young children. Jazz



Friday night Jazz musicians Tim Landers, bass (right), Sinclair Lott, drums (middle), and Albert Wing, sax (left), performed with owner Larry Cohn on piano (not pictured), and Leslie Smith, vocalist (not pictured).

performances are held every other Friday and every Sunday afternoon during warm weather. Look for their schedule online at www.canyonbistro.com.

The lunch menu is similar to the dinner menu, with the addition of some grilled sandwiches. I returned the following week to confirm some information, and indulged in a Croque Madame sandwich (\$10): toasted ham and cheese doused with mornay sauce and topped by a fried egg (cage-free, of course).



Pan-seared red snapper layered over preserved lemon risotto, fire roasted tomatoes, corn and caper vinaigrette and crispy leeks.

Served with a large portion of fries, it was decadent in its richness, and like all the food here, absolutely delicious.

The Bistro also serves a Sunday brunch, which we have not experienced, but friends who have, tell me it is every bit as good as we would expect.

Personable chef Robert Grupp, who perfected his craft at Josies and Pinot Bistro, has been at Canyon Bistro for a year and a half, and has developed a delicious menu using mostly local and sustainable ingredients. Cohn, who also owns the popular Café Mimosa with his wife Claire, has created a wonderful friendly setting to eat great food and hear great music. They have a kids menu (you have to ask for it), take-out services (and order online), as well as complete catering.



Grilled vegetable salad created from all that's local and sustainable.

Canyon Bistro is a Topanga jewel. No need to go to the Westside for a great dining experience. Save your gas money and use it to buy an extra dessert at Canyon Bistro.



Grilled porkchops are served with roasted apples, scalloped potatoes and a whole grain mustard jus.

The Canyon Bistro

Located in Topanga at 120 N. Topanga Canyon Blvd. (in Pine Tree Circle), Topanga, CA. 90290, (310) 455-7800, www.canyonbistro.com.

Lunch: From 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday.

Sunday Brunch: From 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Dinner: From 4 to 9 p.m. Tuesday through Friday, 4 to 10 p.m. Saturday, 4 to 9 p.m. Sunday.

Closed Monday.

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