

Call of The Wild

Claremont's new Three Forks Chop House stays true to its Montana fine-dining inspiration.

BY PENNY E. SCHWARTZ

Think "A River Runs Through It" meets the Inland Empire. Think Montana meets Claremont. Then think Three Forks Chop House, the new restaurant in Claremont's



renovated Packing House building.

Owned by the Bollinger family of the Candlelight Pavilion, the new steak house blends a rustic air with the elegance of fine dining. Its name, theme and cuisine all draw on the town of Three Forks, Montana, where family members spent summers at their grandfather's home.

Executive chef Eric Osley is a graduate of the Cordon Bleu cooking school in Pasadena. He serves as a chef/instructor there along with offering his own take on California cuisine at Three Forks. The Bollingers found Osley's proficiency at preparing meat, especially game varieties, a perfect fit with their rustic theme.

Our meal begins with a basket of breads featuring an olive variety infused with a soupcon of garlic. We sip a Brander 2006 Sauvignon Blanc from the Santa Ynez Valley that sports a light, crisp air. Accompanying the bread is an excellent three-olive



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tapenade alongside a pat of unsalted butter with salt sprinkled on top. When we ask our helpful waitress, Jennifer, about the salt, she offers to bring us a sampling of the house salts. A colorful array of condiments arrives at the table, comprised of volcanic black sea salt from the Big Island of Hawaii, an Australian variety, one flavored with black truffle, another that is fruitwood smoked in-house and a sample of the house Montana dry rub. These salts are available for diners to sprinkle on their meats and other main dishes.

Faster than you can say "Frasier," the chef's amuse bouche arrives and proves to be a smooth, flavorful yet light duck mousse with a hint of sweetness. It comes



nicely chilled on a crisp raisin bread crouton with a dollop of balsamic vinegar.

We follow the amuse with several selections from the bar menu. The wood roasted flat bread resembles a small pizza, sprinkled with pieces of salty wild boar pancetta, arugula leaves and flavorful Ipswich clams steamed in their shells.

The triple prime burger topped with chorizo, manchego, heirloom tomatoes and a smoked paprika aioli is outstanding, one of the best burgers I've had anywhere. Small "sliders" can be tailor-made to the diner's taste with choices of toppings and sauces. Accompanying pommes frites are crisp, delicious and nicely salted.

The two salads we sample are outstanding. "Another Steakhouse Wedge" offers a large wedge of iceberg lettuce topped with

DINING SELECTIONS include stone fruit galette, vanilla (left), elk loin (center), and filet mignon (top). Co-owner Mick Bollinger enjoys the view.

a creamy "Oregonzola" cheese dressing, pickled red onions, heirloom tomatoes and crisp spirals of wild boar pancetta.

Those heirloom tomatoes take center stage in the Sage Farms salad, which pairs tangy yellow and sweet red tomatoes with a soft and mellow blend of burrata and mascarpone cheeses. This medley of flavors includes an unusual olive oil sorbet. Aged balsamic is drizzled on the whole, rendering this salad a dynamite dish.

Also outstanding is the 14-ounce bone-in filet mignon of Black Angus USDA prime Nebraska steak. The meat is cooked perfectly medium rare and so tender it practically falls off the bone. A selection of sauces is available to dress the meat.

The New Zealand elk loin is pan roasted with cherries, shallots and butter in a sweet Syrah sauce. The mild, evenly textured meat does not taste at all gamey, paired with a sweet onion purée and a bacon and onion latke of shredded potatoes. With the meats we enjoy a McMurray Pinot Noir, the house wine from Sonoma County.

Against these outstanding meats, a wild king salmon holds its own. Tender and succulent, it is paired with a smoky white corn and fava bean succotash and a fabulous sweet heirloom tomato marmalade with a purée of English peas.

We wind down our meal with two wonderful desserts prepared by chef de cuisine Chris Franken. The grapefruit parfait is light and refreshing. Chocoholics will thrill to the "Three Forks Banana Split," featuring sweet Ecuadorian bananas layered with Bavarian cream over Scottish shortbreads with scoops of white, milk and dark chocolate sorbets on top. A cheese menu is available as well.

With our coffees comes a tray of after-dessert desserts that include a delightful Italian marshmallow, an almond poppy seed cookie and a chocolate truffle. Oh, and coffees can be sweetened with vanilla macadamia nut sugar. That may or may not be a genuine Montana treat, but it sure goes down easy here in the IE.

Three Forks Chop House, The Packing House, 580 W. First St., Claremont; (909) 625-3875. Lunch Monday-Saturday 11 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.; dinner daily 5:30-9:30 p.m.; brunch Sunday 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Bar menu available until closing time, which varies by the evening. Bar menu, \$4 to \$16; appetizers and starters, \$11 to \$18; entrées, \$28 to \$80; desserts, \$6 to \$9. Accepts major credit cards. Reservations recommended.