

TRAVELING TEXAS / Follow the light to upscale dining / San Antonio eatery beckons with new entrees

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SAN ANTONIO - The new Lighthouse in Olmos Park here sports an extensive breakfast menu, and it's offered all day. But no matter how good baked egg-bread pudding or a Gruyère omelet with caramelized onions sounded - and it sounded mighty good - I couldn't tear myself away from the new entrees being offered during two recent visits.

Chef Eric Rocha, a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y., has devised a menu of upscale comfort favorites, including braised short ribs with pappardelle and pot roast with vegetables, each presented with a welcome twist.

So, expect the suddenly trendy, retro favorite meatloaf, but don't expect your mother's version. This rendition is redolent with black pepper and flecked with minced carrot. It features a thin, crunchy crust on the edges and soft center that calls you back for bite after bite.

Crab cakes are everywhere these days, too, but this one takes its place among the best I've had lately thanks to succulent pieces of fresh jumbo lump meat accompanied by the bright, inviting presence of fresh lemon and lime juices used in the accompaniments.

Perhaps the star dish was simplicity itself: roasted chicken. So many things could have gone wrong with this dish as they do in other restaurants. The chicken could have been dried out and tasted reheated, or the skin could have gotten soggy while the flavor leached out from sitting too long in a steam tray. Rocha's version was practically perfect, however, with crispy skin over moist meat. Insanely good mashed potatoes, hot and creamy, made for a perfect accompaniment.

Diners looking for a lighter dish have a number of choices, including the Crispy Citrus Salmon Salad. I've had this dish several times in recent years, and I'm happy to report that it has been consistently prepared, fresh and satisfying. Especially good is the slice of grilled mango playfully perched alongside the salmon.

At lunch, the sandwich menu includes even more favorites that have earned fans through the years. Not for the Cat is a tuna salad sandwich, while the Late Hill of Beans features chicken salad with grapes and walnuts on a croissant. Chicken and Brie on Focaccia gained from the inclusion of juicy, tangy pear slices, but the Chicken Caesar Wrap contained a slice of bacon so overcooked it had the texture of sawdust.

An expanded drink list ranges from wine to hot cider, though coffee seemed less emphasized than the extensive tea list. A bakery has also been added, and it's a plus in terms of the breads we encountered. A few of the sweets could use a little help, however. A red velvet cupcake was dried out, a slice of cherry pie was overbaked and lacked essential tartness, and a bread pudding with crème anglaise was adequate but no more. A Brown Cow milkshake with a jolt of espresso and a ganache-filled chocolate cake were much better.

The space is large and simply adorned with a few photographs detailing lighthouses. It seems slightly impersonal.

Special mention must be made of the way owner Lemae Koogler has managed to train a cordial and competent wait staff, capable of handling most every request or substitution that comes their way. The servers on both visits were as pleasant and welcoming as the meatloaf was delicious.

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TEXAS' TOP RESTAURANTS?

The debate rages on, but here are some eateries (outside of Houston) that would make almost anyone's list.

Aurora, Dallas

Fearing's, Dallas

Inn at Dos Brisas, Brenham

Jeffrey's, Austin

Le Réve, San Antonio

Uchi, Austin

York Street, Dallas

...

THE LIGHTHOUSE AT OLMOS PARK

4212 McCullough Ave., San Antonio, 210-805-9229, www.lhcafe.com

Breakfast/lunch/dinner: Daily (Sunday until 6 p.m.)

Notes: An extensive drink list includes coffees, tea, wine, hot cider, shakes, smoothies and house-made lemonade. Jazz and half-priced wine on Saturday nights.

Price range (dinner): Starters \$5-\$12; entrees \$9.50-\$28

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