

# San Francisco Chronicle

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## Bird Dog brings a slice of city style to Palo Alto



Friends who live on the Peninsula repeatedly complain that the restaurant options lag far behind what they can find in San Francisco. While this area may be the center of creativity in terms of technology, you'll find little of that spirit behind the stoves.

Robbie Wilson is taking up the challenge of trying to give Palo Alto a restaurant that competes with what San Francisco has to offer. He has cooked at many high-end restaurants, including stints with Michel Troisgros and Nobu Matsuhisa. He was the chef of Matsuhisa in Aspen, Colo., and most recently headed up the kitchen at Mattei's Tavern in Los Olivos (Santa Barbara County). Wilson and his wife, Emily, moved to the Peninsula to open Bird Dog.

The sophistication of this venture is evident immediately upon entering the visually stunning interior, when the eyes are drawn to the dozens of hand-blown lighted orbs hanging from the open wood ceiling. The decor, designed by Jamie Bush, is a pleasing balance of refined and raw with painted concrete walls contrasting smooth cork floors, blue mohair banquettes and sliding Japanese screens that partition off a semi-private room warmed by a gas fireplace. Wood ducks hanging from the ceiling and on the walls reinforce the name. When entering the bathroom, located behind the open kitchen, there's a surreal jolt of hearing the high-pitched, lilting voice of Julia Child from her classic cooking shows. She apparently was a regular customer of an inn where Wilson once worked, and this is his homage to her.

Back in the dining room, sleek brass table bases are topped with thick wood slabs. Sturdy pottery service plates and cylinders that hold chopsticks and gunmetal gray flatware foreshadow Wilson's East-West mashups. The menu is divided into three sections of raw foods, hot foods and vegetables. In all, there are 18 savory dishes, including what many might consider sides, such as whole heirloom carrots (\$14) piled on one side of the plate glazed with red curry, tamarind and orange.

Soon after patrons place an order, a waiter arrives with a green milk-glass cake plate topped with perfectly warm roti glistening in butter and sprinkled with spices, another indication of the menu's eclecticism.



At Mattei's Tavern, Wilson was known for wood-grilled avocado (\$14), and that has become the signature dish at Bird Dog. He cuts the avocado in half, grills the two sides and fills the seed hole with ponzu, adding a dab of fresh wasabi on the side. The barely warm flesh picks up a smokiness from the grill, creating a dramatic play against the creaminess of the fruit.

Avocados are part of the raw category along with three strikingly presented crudos, including hirame (\$15) where four loosely curled slices are lined up in the center of the plate, each crowned with shaved coins of jalapeño and whipped dollops of coconut milk. Thin slices of radishes are propped against each slice, set in a puddle of Thai-flavored sauce. There's also big eye tuna with aged soy (\$19), and Tai snapper (\$17), which turned out to be the best of the three, thanks to the unexpected addition of pecans that added a crunch to complement the silken texture of the fish spiced with lime, chiles and sesame oil.

In another raw dish, Wilson places grilled half-moons of room-temperature butternut squash (\$15) around the top third of the plate under a pile of leafy greens, too sparingly dressed in a vinaigrette made from clementines, flanked by mounds of burrata. It sounded good but didn't taste that compelling. The other salad, apples and cheddar (\$14), covered the entire plate. The greens, mostly frisee, are laced with shavings of cheese and thin slices of apples. It was definitely fresh, but marred with so much grit we left most of it behind.

The five vegetable dishes include an intricately conceived potato terrine (\$12) layered with kabocha squash, enriched with brown butter. The thin slice of terrine is plated with swipes of bright yellow squash puree that adds a dramatic splash of color to the black plate.



Portions on many of the seven meat and seafood items appear small, accentuated by the fact that everything is served on oversize plates.

Two thick slices of rare duck are surrounded by dribs and dabs of pumpkin sauce, banana and crushed cashews. The meat was excellent but the sauce tasted more like a garnish than an integral part of the dish. Four medallions of Wagyu rib-eye (\$33) are fanned next to a frothy knob of satsuma with a charcoal-like powder. A chunk of salmon (\$24) with a balanced sauce of honey, lemon and chamomille is topped with arugula, sprouts and other vegetables. It's one of the most simply presented and satisfying combinations.

The fried chicken thighs (\$18) — three in all — seem out of place because the portion size is disproportionate to other main courses. They are presented in the center of the plate surrounded by dots of green curry and a puddle of sauce made from egg yolks; the advertised smoked uni sounded interesting but doesn't register on the palate.

Even though the portions are small, the two thick slabs of pork belly (\$21) — which the waiter recommended be served medium rare — were too much because there was nothing to counteract the richness. The pork was topped with squid, next to a petite mound of bland slaw and seven dots of mango puree, which did little to cut the fat.

At times the items are so minimalist — four pieces of strip loin steak (\$31) next to a small puddle of herb sauce — that if it were a car I'm not sure it would run. I generally subscribe to the principle that less is more, but sometimes less is simply less. At Bird Dog, the sauces often seem to add color to the plate, but not much to the overall effect.



For dessert Wilson offers three choices, including a really good individual lemon tart with avocado ice cream (\$8), a forgettable cookie plate (\$5) and chocolate creameux (\$8) that tastes as if it has more salt than sugar.

Service is almost painfully enthusiastic, with waiters offering advice on their favorite dishes, and detailing what's in each item before they even take a cocktail order. On subsequent visits, things smoothed out a bit but still was a step behind the sophistication of the food and atmosphere.

Even though the restaurant still hasn't found its center, it's one of the brightest spots on the Peninsula. It's exciting to try something that pushes the envelope a little further, and Wilson has done just that.

★ ★ ½

### **Bird Dog**

**Food:** ★ ★ ½

**Service:** ★ ★

**Atmosphere:** ★ ★ ★ ½

**Price:** \$\$\$\$

**Noise:** Three Bells

420 Ramona St. (near Lytton), Palo Alto; (650) 656-8180 or [birddogpa.com](http://birddogpa.com). Dinner Monday-Saturday. Full bar. Reservations and credit cards accepted. Difficult street parking; some lots.















