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Ngoc Ngo

Minimalist Eatery Bird Dog Serves Up Big Plates, Small Treats



WAGYU THE DOG: Smeared sauces help accentuate most dishes, like Wagyu skirt steak, at Bird Dog.

Minimalist design doesn't get any simpler than a large window set against a dark concrete exterior. Underneath this window, at **Palo Alto's** Bird Dog restaurant, is a hardly noticeable, industrial-style sign cut out of metal. It is the sole indication that this is indeed Bird Dog.

The sign could be missed entirely and the grand, wood-paneled front doors would look like the opening to a boutique hotel.

The minimalism continues to the menu, which currently has a whopping 18 items. I prefer it this way. I came to eat, not think. Our waiter was nearly flawless in his service, guiding us through the menu and ingredient substitutions for the night. The persimmon in the salad was replaced with grilled butternut squash (\$15) and served with mixed greens dressed in a vinegar from cuties—those adorable clementines. Heavenly dollops of stretchy and creamy burrata, imported from Italy, begged to be gobbled up first. Never hesitate when it comes to great burrata.

As detected from the décor, there is a dusting of Asian influence over the establishment and a leaning towards California cuisine in the menu. It was more apparent in the heirloom carrots (\$14), with sauces made from red curry and tamarind. While the quality of the locally grown carrots was amazing, they were juxtaposed with an Asian-like sauce when they could have been at their best if simply roasted. Not to sound cliché, but less can be more.

It seems customary here to artfully arrange the food by using as little of a big beautiful plate as possible. As long as it tastes good, I don't mind. Pieces of the Wagyu skirt steak (\$29) formed a line down the center of the plate with papaya sauce dots around, an avocado smear at the edge sprinkled with crushed pistachio, and a Fresno chile for contrast. Although skirt steak is not the tastiest of cuts, this is a Wagyu steak after all. On its own it was fair. The papaya sauce and avocado smear helped enhance the flavor.

As I learned through the meal, the sauces were not just pretentious plate decorations. Rather, they are deliberately chosen and meticulously plated to be dipped, smeared, smothered and combined in all manners to aide in the enjoyment of the dish. The sauces were especially unique in the fried chicken thigh (\$18). A crunchy chicken thigh piece with already flavorful breading sits in a pool of yellow sauce which may have had smoked uni. Separate dots of green curry sauce adorned the plate. After trying different variations, my favorite way to consume this soon-to-be famous fried chicken was to dip it in the yellow sauce and then the green curry sauce.

The bright dining room had a modern farmhouse feel. Wooden ducks are arranged on the walls, tying in with the name as a bird dog is used for hunting. Bird Dog only serves dinner six days a week, but it felt as if we were dining in broad daylight thanks to strings of orb lanterns. They line the length of the room, drawing attention to the open kitchen. It's a daring yet trending concept to have the kitchen staff on display.

Meal service felt like dinner and a show as I sipped my smooth tequila-based Duck Blind (\$14) with lemon and pear and watched the staff hard at work. It's a pleasure to witness a kitchen staff without any tension or yelling. Most of the background noise was truly from the music and guests immersed in conversation. Individual item prices are reasonable, but the portions are rather small. More dishes are required to make a meal here, which is likely the intent.

Don't let the simplicity fool you as high quality burrata and perfectly executed fried chicken are rare finds. For those in the mood for dinner as an experience, Bird Dog fits the bill.