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ONE REPUBLIC, INDIVISIBLE

WITH MEAT AND VEGAN OPTIONS FOR ALL

BY BRANDON HERNÁNDEZ

Over a career spanning decades, chef Michael Brown has opened a great many restaurants. Bringing so many concepts to life can easily lead to complacency or falling into a nearly robotic set of processes, but over a recent flatbread and strong-ale combo, Brown cited the rather high level of excitement associated with instituting the culinary program at his current digs, Barrel Republic in Oceanside.

"I have had an eclectic culinary path that included the pleasure of working with amazing talent such as Michel Richard of Citronelle in San Francisco, and working in fantastic areas of the country such as Colorado, Arizona, Northern and Southern California. I have been the executive chef of multiple locations, as well as corporate chef for 14 different restaurants while in Arizona, which incorporated a wide variety of cuisines," says Brown.

Several years back, the chef took the opportunity to return to San Diego and, after working at several restaurants, found what he calls the "perfect fit" with Barrel Republic, a duo of same-name spots that both offer robust tap lists where customers serve themselves using computerized wristband technology. It's a concept that proved immediately successful at Barrel Republic's first Pacific Beach location, enough that its North County sister-spot was opened. Perhaps the only complaint with the PB original, it was that it didn't serve food. That's been solved, thanks to Brown, at the Oside location.

"I love what Barrel Republic offers—a super-rad spot with a great beer selection and food to match. I enjoy being part of Oceanside's craft and culinary scene, and can't wait to see the company expand and grow," Brown says, referencing a third venue in Carlsbad that's currently in the works.

Despite having a rather small kitchen, Brown's menu is rather extensive and impressive for two reasons. First of all, everything is from-scratch and cooked fresh—the restaurant doesn't even have a freezer. House-made items include cured salmon and turkey, baked seaweed crackers, soba noodles, hot sauce, pestos, queso dip, tapenade, barbecue sauce, aiolis, mustards, vinaigrettes, pickled vegetables and rave-garnering pretzels.

Second, the food is built to be paired with beer, but goes beyond typical



items to accomplish that. It's a big deal for Brown that guests of any dietary frame-of-mind can find something to enjoy in tandem with one or many of the 48 beers (plus several wines) on tap. This means satisfying vegans instead of just leaning heavy on pork-fat and cheese. But more than anything, a key to the quality is freshness.

"Our food mantra can be summed up as 'fresh is first!' We truly want to match the great craft-beer being produced in San Diego with top-notch craft-food and fresh ingredients at a reasonable price. Right now, the most expensive item on our menu is \$12.50," says Brown. "We give give patrons



the ease of shareable dishes, with innovation and some traditional classics that everyone can enjoy. In doing so, we try to utilize as many fresh, in-house techniques as possible to ensure everything that comes out of our kitchen is top-notch."

In keeping with Barrel Republic's "freedom to pour" philosophy, rather than mandate pairings, Brown prefers customers use the self-service format to try numerous beers with his dishes and find their own perfect match. It's carpe diem...whether you're sipping bacon-fried bacon or a mushroom French dip with vegan-friendly mozzarella!

Bacon-fried Bacon

YIELD: 8 SERVINGS

- ◆ 1 cup chile powder
- ◆ ½ cup garlic powder
- ◆ ½ cup cumin
- ◆ ½ cup salt
- ◆ ½ cup black pepper
- ◆ 1 4-pound slab pork belly
- ◆ water
- ◆ 40 slices bacon
- ◆ pure Grade A amber honey

Preheat oven to 300 degrees Fahrenheit.

Mix the chile powder, garlic powder, cumin, salt and pepper together until thoroughly incorporated. Evenly coat the pork belly with the spice blend and place in a roasting pan. Fill the pan with ½-inch of water. Place in the oven and cook until tender, approximately 4 hours. Remove from the oven and let cool to room temperature. Cover the pork belly with aluminum foil and place a sheet pan on top of the meat. Use something heavy and wide to weigh

down the sheet pan and flatten the pork belly. Place in the refrigerator until cold, at least 1 hour.

Preheat oil to 350 degrees Fahrenheit in a large pot or electric fryer. Remove the pork belly from the refrigerator and cut into cubes the width of a standard piece of bacon. They should come in around 1½ ounces each. Wrap each cube with a slice of bacon and skewer it. In batches of 5, fry the pork belly until crispy, about 3 minutes. Remove from the oil and drain on paper towels.

To serve, dip the bacon cubes into the honey to coat. Place a mound of lettuce in the center of a small bowl. Arrange the skewers around the mound and serve immediately.

Wild Mushroom French Dip

YIELD: 4 SERVINGS

- ◆ ¼ cup olive oil
- ◆ 1 pound mushrooms (preferably a combination of oyster, portabella and domestic mushrooms)
- ◆ 10 ounces yellow onions, sliced
- ◆ salt and freshly ground pepper to taste
- ◆ 4 hoagie sandwich rolls
- ◆ 1 cup spinach leaves
- ◆ 6 ounces vegan mozzarella, shredded (e.g., Daiya Brand)
- ◆ Mushroom Au Jus (recipe follows)

Heat the oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Add the mushrooms and onions, season with salt and pepper, and cook until soft and tender, 4 to 5 minutes. Remove from the skillet and set aside.

To serve, place the rolls open-faced on a cutting board. Top each with an even layer of spinach, followed by the mushroom mixture. Top with an even layer of mozzarella and place on a rectangular plate with a cup of warm au jus on the side.

Mushroom Au Jus

YIELD: 28 OUNCES

- ◆ 3 cups mushroom stems (from the fresh mushrooms used for this recipe)
- ◆ 3 cups dried porcini mushrooms
- ◆ 2 yellow onions, quartered
- ◆ ½ bunch celery, cut into fourths
- ◆ 2 large carrots, cut into fourths
- ◆ ½ cup garlic cloves, halved
- ◆ 1 gallon water
- ◆ sea salt to taste

Place all of the ingredients in a stock pot over high heat. Bring the mixture to a boil and cook for 45 minutes. Strain, season with additional salt as needed, and serve or store, refrigerated in an airtight container, for up to 1 week. ▸



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