

Review: Beyond the burger at Urban Grill

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By **BRAD A. JOHNSON** / ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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The burger is why I'm here. Someone mentioned that I ought to try the burger at Urban Grill & Wine Bar in Foothill Ranch, so when I found myself hungry in this corner of the county in the middle of the afternoon, at an hour that qualifies as neither lunch nor dinner, I was happy to find this place.

The burger is as classic as they come, a nice fatty blend of sirloin and brisket, cooked perfectly medium-rare, as ordered, and sandwiched between a pillowy bun with lettuce, a slice of tomato and a tight knot of crispy, frizzly onion rings. It requires both hands to squeeze the whole thing down to a size that will almost fit between my teeth. I bite it from several angles, slowly working my way into its juicy middle. The potatoes that come with it are pretty good, too, a tall, haystack of skinny fries. Frankly, though, I'd rather have a big stack of those onion rings, but those aren't listed on the menu. They're just a nice little garnish on the burger (and the rib-eye steak, too).

This part of the county doesn't have a lot of great dining options. The nicest restaurants in this neck of the woods are probably the nearby Outback, Souplantation and Chili's. Friends who live in the neighborhood swear by it. And given the crowds even on a Tuesday night, it's obvious that the neighborhood is thankful for a chef-driven alternative to the chains.

Urban Grill isn't fancy. It's in a strip mall alongside a Starbucks and a Wahoo's, and it dresses the part, with tall bar-like tables in the front room next to the open kitchen, and candlelit tables without tablecloths in the main dining area. The restaurant showcases the work of local artists, and by the looks of the art that's on display, this part of the county is short on artists, too. But the awkward paintings give the place a cozy, friendly, neighborhood coffeehouse vibe.

Aside from the burger, one of my favorite things about this place is the wine program. There are more than 30 choices by the glass, mostly from boutique producers at reasonable (but not cheap) prices. And you can pick any three glasses for a customized flight. One night, it's chef David Hall himself who comes to the table to uncork the

wine we've ordered, a nice pinot noir from the Russian River. The beautiful red wine is surprisingly ice-cold, as if it's been stored in the same near-freezing cooler as the Champagne. We don't have to point this out, as the chef actually notices it before we do. "I'm really sorry about that," he says as he's filling our glasses, somewhat embarrassed.

Standouts on the menu include a recent special of pan-roasted arctic char, a rich salmon-like fish that is beautifully caramelized and served atop house-made butternut squash ravioli in a sauce of brown butter and sage.

The pork chop is also superb, measuring more than two-ribs thick, cooked just short of medium, so that the meat is still tremendously tender and vaguely pink in the center. The pork is glazed with an Asian-inspired barbecue sauce, although I'm having a hard time putting my finger on exactly which Asian country might have provided the inspiration. China? Korea? Just our own California melting pot, I guess.

There's a steak listed on the menu as "prime ribeye," but it takes me only a bite or two to realize that "prime ribeye" isn't really the same as USDA Prime. I should have known this from the price alone, which is \$30 for a decent-sized (if somewhat thin) piece of beef. There's also a filet mignon for a dollar more. Both steaks are completely drenched in sauce, which makes my heart sink when the plates arrive. There's no quicker way to ruin a good steak than to drown it with sauce. But that's also a good way to camouflage an otherwise mediocre piece of meat, so maybe that's what's really going on here. Fortunately, the au gratin potatoes that come with both steaks are great, a gooey cheesy mess that consistently upstages the beef.

The best way to begin a meal here is with either the ahi poke or the seared scallops. The poke is a classic crudo of tuna splashed with spicy sesame soy and peanuts. The scallops are big and meaty and served with a garlic chili sauce. The fish and chips are great. The mac and cheese is velvety good.

The salumi plate is a big disappointment, just a flat layering of generic salami and sopressata. I've been even less impressed with the Alaskan king crab legs, whose meat proves to be somewhat mealy, and the prosciutto-wrapped shrimp, which are woefully overcooked.

Those same tough, chewy shrimp turn up again on top of an odd dish of near-naked linguine, half-dressed with a sun-dried tomato pesto. What I find most peculiar about this dish is the addition of a handful of grated mozzarella that's plopped on top of the pasta. Shredded mozzarella on linguine? It forms a little lump on top that doesn't quite blend in when I try to toss it all together.

The menu doesn't change between lunch and dinner, and there's a large section of the menu devoted to sandwiches and salads. The skirt steak salad is better than either of the two steak entrees. And the grilled tri-tip sandwich is almost as good as the burger.

When it comes time for dessert, I ask the waitress whether she prefers the cobbler or the flourless chocolate cake. She takes a breath. Her eyes roll into the back of her head, and for a split-second I think she's about to re-enact a scene from "When Harry Met Sally." But then she catches herself. "Definitely the chocolate," she says. "I mean they're both good. But the chocolate is thick and rich and dense ..." We all start laughing. Clearly this woman needs some chocolate right now.

The chocolate is just as she describes it, eye-roll and all. But as good as the chocolate is, I much prefer the cobbler. The flavor of fruit has been different on each of my visits. One time it's cherry and peach. Another time it's apple and raspberry. Yet another, it's strawberry. And every time, it's fantastic. "Be careful, this is hot," our waitress says as she places the ceramic crock on our table. But that doesn't slow us down. It was the burger that brought me here. But it's the cobbler that's kept me coming back.

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CINDY YAMANAKA, ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Rating: 2 stars

Where: 27412 Portola Parkway, Foothill Ranch

Hours: 11 a.m.-9:30 p.m. Mondays-Thursdays; 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays; 10:30 a.m.-9:30 p.m. Sundays

Don't miss: Burger, pork chop, arctic char (if available), skirt steak salad, fruit cobbler.

Best place to sit: In the back corner of the dining room, or at the chef's counter.

About the noise: Loud but comfortable

Cost: Appetizers, \$10-\$33; salads, \$8-\$13; sandwiches, \$8-\$17; entrees, \$13-\$31; desserts, \$7-\$10; corkage, \$15.

Phone: 949-340-2055

What the stars mean:

0 = poor, unacceptable

1 = fair, with some noteworthy qualities

2 = good, solid, above average

3 = excellent, memorable, well above norm

4 = world-class, extraordinary in every detail

Reviews are based on multiple visits. Ratings reflect the reviewer's overall reaction to food, ambience and service