

TABLE TALK



Rustic Elegance

Chef Andy Brooks adds his namesake restaurant to the short list of hot tables in Ventura

BY MATT KATZ

PHOTOS BY STEPHEN SCHAFER

Somewhere in the tony Gold Coast area of Chicago there's a space where Restaurant BROOKS would fit seamlessly. San Francisco's Mission District, West L.A., Santa Monica. They all have a spot for BROOKS. But Ventura?

I realize the mercurial evolution of fine dining here runs the risk of becoming an overplayed topic of conversation. Even so, the about-face of downtown Ventura—an unpretentious nook better known for Harleys than haute cuisine—is still fresh enough to elicit audible gasps, particularly from shocked foodies in Santa Barbara, Ventura's glossy sibling to the northwest. And, as far as I'm concerned, when an acclaimed chef like Andy Brooks throws his toque into the local ring the culinary conversation goes on.

Brooks' resume is stacked. He was Head Cook at Montecito's Stonehouse Restaurant; Chef at Lark Creek Café in San Francisco, where he worked with the luminary Bradley Ogden; and Sous Chef at both Drago in Santa Monica and NAHA in Chicago. Prior to returning home to Southern California, he was Chef de Cuisine at DC Coast, one of the top restaurants in Washington, DC.

And now he brings his style of "rustic elegance" to none other than Ventura. "We looked at other locations," says Brooks, "but this is the last little beach town of its kind. It's like Santa Barbara was 20 years ago."

We're sitting across from one another at a two-top in his namesake restaurant at the corner of Thompson and California Street, surrounded by the buzz of pre-dinner prep work: chopping, singing, clanking silverware. The room is nouveau industrial chic, reminiscent of an urban design studio with its high ceiling and exposed brick and metal piping. Mid-century modern patterns adorn the chairs, the circular motif coordinating with oversized zebrawood light fixtures and matching wall art. The space is clean and open, which, after dining several times at BROOKS, I've found allows din-

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Clockwise from left: Sage Margarita, with sage infused tequila, blood orange juice, Grand Marnier, and chile salt; Star Anise & Coriander-Dusted Yellowfin Tuna, with baby bok choy, foie gras ginger pot stickers, and green curry sauce; the contemporary urban style dining room at Restaurant BROOKS.

ers to focus on the food—described by the chef as “new American with a global slant.”

“I’ve opened four restaurants from the ground up,” he explains, “but this is my first solo venture. Actually, my wife, Jayme, and I have it together. She got her MBA in business from Duke, so she’s taking care of the financial side.”

At first glance, Andy Brooks strikes an imposing figure: a head taller than most men, with a clean-shaven dome and fierce goatee. But his playful approach to cooking reveals something quite incongruous. Brooks balances high-brow training with down-home flavors, adding what he calls “a fun twist” to many dishes. He serves prime bone-in ribeye chop steak with a rosemary zinfandel sauce, adding raisins, garlic sautéed rapini, and jalapeño cheese grits. And not just any old grits. “They’re hand milled grits I get from a little family miller down in South Carolina,” he says, clearly proud of the dish’s uniqueness. “Takes me 12 days to get them... I like to play around with different things you don’t see much, like grits and collard greens.”

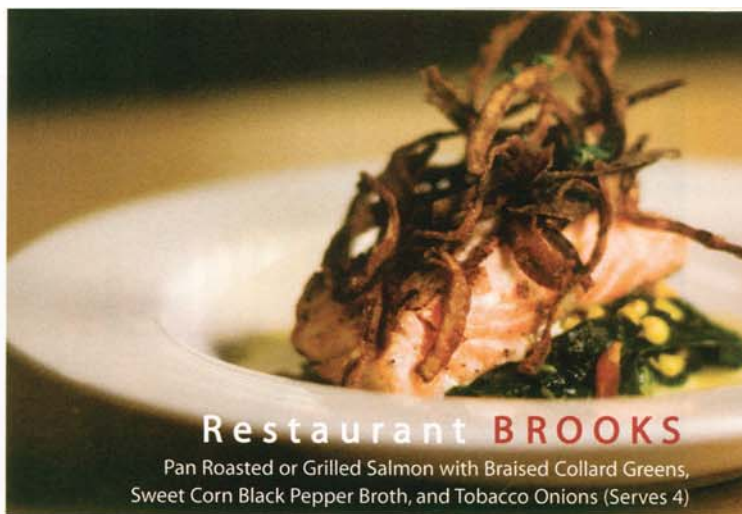
The wine list at BROOKS is similarly unconventional, boasting limited production boutique brands in addition to familiar labels. “It’s not a grocery store list,” he says. “I want people to branch out and try new things.”

Brooks’ culinary approach is simple: big, bold flavors from recognizable foods, abetted by a limited menu—which allows the kitchen crew to focus their attention on details. The pine nut crusted halibut with lemon, baby arugula, and black olive and sun-dried tomato vinaigrette is a study in contrasts, the combo of sour, bitter, and sweet bringing the delicate flavored fish to life. The marinated short ribs, on the other hand, are a rich indulgence, served with a cider barbecue glaze, olive oil parsnip purée, and watercress artichoke salad. For adventurous palates (or indecisive diners), the culinary highlight is a five-course tasting menu, which provides an opportunity to sample some of Chef Andy’s signature dishes and seasonal creations.

While the menu is decidedly advanced and dinner tends to attract the smart set, BROOKS is anything but pretentious. Drawing a comparison to Ventura’s laid-back character, Sous Chef Shawn Williams says, “We don’t want to be a ‘special occasion restaurant’ where people feel like they have to wear a three-piece suit to walk in and eat dinner.”

Andy echoes that tone, emphasizing that “the whole restaurant ties in to family and friends.” He points out the centerpiece candles lighting each table: “Even these candles are hand-blown by a friend of my wife’s.”

On a warm Friday evening the room is loud with spiffy patrons. Table-hopping uptown residents sit at the bar beside chic twentysomethings sipping Sage Margaritas. A local celebrity draws an occasional glance of recognition from neighboring diners. BROOKS, it seems, has joined the short list of hot tables in Ventura—a different “Windy City” on a different “Gold Coast,” a place where the fine dining revolution is no longer anticipated. It is upon us. ▀



Restaurant BROOKS

Pan Roasted or Grilled Salmon with Braised Collard Greens, Sweet Corn Black Pepper Broth, and Tobacco Onions (Serves 4)

Tobacco Onions

- 2 Spanish onions, thin sliced (in rounds)
- 3 tablespoons Cajun spice
- 1 tablespoon all-purpose flour
- 2-3 cups soy or corn oil for frying

Sweet Corn Black Pepper Broth

- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1/2 cup diced Spanish onion
- 2 tablespoons chopped garlic
- 2 cups roasted corn kernels or canned corn
- 1/8 cup mirin (Japanese sweet cooking wine)
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 4 cups vegetable stock
- salt & black pepper

Salmon

- 4 6oz. salmon filets
- salt & black pepper

Collard Greens

- 3 bunches collard greens (clean off stock, large dice)
- 1 cup diced apple wood smoked bacon
- 2 diced red bell peppers
- 2 cups roasted corn kernels
- salt & black pepper

Make Tobacco Onion: Toss sliced onions, Cajun spice, and flour together in a bowl. Heat oil in sauté pan to 350 degrees. Fry onions in pan until golden brown and crispy.

Make sweet corn black pepper broth: In a sauce pot, sauté onions and garlic in butter until translucent. Add corn to onions and garlic and continue sautéing. Add vegetable stock to pot and reduce liquid until flavors are combined. Purée the mixture in food processor and strain through China Cap. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Adjust seasoning and consistency of broth with remaining vegetable stock.

Make collard greens: Blanch collard greens in large pot of rapidly boiling salted water. Remove greens and shock in cold water. In a large skillet cook bacon until crispy. Add red bell pepper and cook until tender. Add corn and collard greens, continue cooking until all flavors are well blended. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

Meanwhile, prepare salmon: Season with salt and pepper; grill or pan roast until medium rare. Place sweet corn black pepper broth in bottom of deep bowl. Place collard greens in center of bowl on top of the broth. Place salmon on top of collard greens. Finish with tobacco onions on top of salmon.