

BUFFALO RISING ONLINE

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Dining in Style: 31 Club **Story and Photos By: Christa Glennie Seychew**

Lovingly restored, the 31 Club--a former night club turned supper club located on the corner of North Johnson and Elmwood--is a remarkable addition to the neighborhood. Both the interior and the exterior have been finished with an eye for subtle extravagance and fine craftsmanship.

Arrive early, for once you sweep up the stairs, through the graceful front doors and tastefully decorated entryway, a cocktail must be had at the luxurious horseshoe-shaped bar. Often manned by Sonny, one of Buffalo's most affable and well-respected bartenders, guests can order from a good selection of wines by the glass (though I had wished for prosecco) and top-notch cocktails. A handful of tables tickle the edges of this elegant room, and in this writer's estimation, it is the place to see and be seen.

In other areas of the restaurant's varied and interesting layout, you will find a modestly-sized room decorated with buttery tones, where sunshine or candlelight - depending on the time of day - bounce from mirror to

crystal to silver, creating unique warmth and depth. Booths with moderately tall banquettes covered in a fine grey-toned cloth line the narrower portions of the building. At each table, bone china sparkles and goblets gleam, and at every turn, fine fabrics, tasteful wall-coverings and beautiful accoutrements tempt the eyes and ready the palate. Before a sip of wine has been swallowed or a nibble had, the sumptuousness of 31 Club's décor will win you over.

Although the look of 31 Club pays homage to the era of the private supper club (with a nod to modernity for good measure), the menu is New American with--according to Chef Mark Camalleri--a touch of Basque, France, Spain and Italy. "But then we have steak," Camalleri says, "You've got to have the steaks, and a few extras, like the duck fries."

Ahh, the duck fat fries. With the exception of the very balanced and delightful caponata and fresh bread that arrived at our table, the duck fries were our first taste of 31 Club. Served in a Keller-esque cone lined with white paper, they were perfectly prepared and delicately seasoned with truffle salt. (For those of you reeling at the thought of enjoying fries cooked in piping hot duck fat, I've provided [a link](#) that may slow your palpitations). In a portion large enough for our group to enjoy, the duck fries were a sure hit.

As the Executive Chef, Camalleri helped to put City Grill on the map in the 90s and also assisted restaurateur Steve Calvaneso with the opening of Bacchus and Ya-Ya Brewhouse. In recent years he's been responsible for the development of the suburban Embers Grill (a family business owned by his step-parents).

31's appetizers pull from a broad range of influences; they include tuna tacos with shells made from crisp wontons and a play on a BLT. A pretzel crusted crab cake, steamed mussels and a very popular lobster mac and cheese also make an appearance. On my visit, there were about a dozen starters in all, including specials. A small selection of soups and salads were also available.



Much of the menu borrows from the Mediterranean region, as the chef mentioned. Chef tells me of his commitment to using environmentally responsible ingredients. This can be found in both the free-range chicken breast (served with a white bean stew) and the evening's offering of a walleye pike with almond butter. Camalleri consults the well-respected Monterey Bay Seafood Watch list to ensure that any seafood served at 31 is sustainably farmed or free of endangerment concerns (you can [download a regional pocket guide](#) on the Monterey Bay website to ensure you make similar choices at the supermarket).

Our table ordered the previously mentioned chicken, eggplant lasagna (\$17) and a pasta special (which wasn't memorable). I considered ordering either the veal chop served with crispy sweetbreads (\$45) or the [Pekin](#) duck (not to be confused with [Peking Duck](#)) which is served with squash potato gratin and a wild huckleberry jus (\$24.50).

Ultimately I selected the rib chop, which came with the very autumnal accompaniments of sweet potatoes, apple hash and cider sauce. Though its texture was very similar to [Berkshire](#) pork, it did not have the same "wild" nuances one anticipates with that breed. Its tenderness and flavor profile led me to assume that it had been brined, but Camalleri informed me that it was a new type of pork, layered with all of the juiciness we have come to admire in a breed like Berkshire, but without the muskiness or the price tag; it was only \$24, well below the price a Berkshire chop would fetch.

"I love to use what's fresh. I like to be the first kid on the block to try things if I can. I can't stand it when you go to a restaurant and they offer the same starch and the same vegetable for every single dish on the menu." Camalleri tells me. "That's not "cheffing", that's being a cook. I like to design each plate individually. I want people to experience different textures and tastes with every plate."

Nowhere is that more evident than in the steak portion of the menu. On the evening of my visit there is a filet mignon served with a gorgonzola polenta cake, broccolini and a port wine sauce (\$36), a 14oz. strip dusted with black tea smoked cherry sea salt and served with sautéed spinach and cheddar potatoes au gratin (\$32), and a 16oz. Delmonico with fingerlings and green beans (\$34). I'm sure that most diners will appreciate that each entrée is offered with unique side dishes (which at the guest's request, can be substituted at no extra charge for any of the other side dishes offered with any other entrée on the menu). In this respect, and many others, Chef goes out of his way to please his guests. And although it is a little odd given that each dish arrives with its own sides, a selection of steakhouse-style sides are also offered (in portions appropriate for 2-3 people), allowing guests the opportunity to sample and share tasty options like goat cheese smashed potatoes (\$7) and those lux duck fries (\$7).

31 Club is open seven days a week, and strives to make its guests feel at home. To this end, the restaurant's owners and Camalleri have begun a casual Sunday offering of housemade, old fashioned lasagna. "We don't want to be a special occasion restaurant," Camalleri says, "We want people to come here and be comfortable and enjoy themselves."

Chef Camalleri cautions me that the menu is undergoing seasonal changes, and that diners can expect to see some lighter fare and new selections sprinkled amongst the restaurant's crowd favorites. Food critics (and even us lowly restaurant reviewers) appreciate that any new restaurant should not really be judged until it has been open for a fair number of months, allowing time for the staff to be trained, the menu to be honed and the kinks to be worked out. Conversely, the public clamors for stars to be awarded and verdicts delivered upon the close of opening night. I think it will be interesting to see what 31 Club tastes like six, or even three, months from now. Watching a new restaurant find its niche is one of my favorite aspects of the business.

31's new menu will roll out soon; keep an eye on their website for updates.