

The "leaning tower of beets," served with spring greens, is an eye-popping appetizer at Better Half in Hillcrest. Photo Courtesy: Union-Tribune

Joys in the 'hood

Neighborhood cafes go gourmet yet stay affordable

By **Lori Welsberg**, STAFF WRITER

Exciting, inventive cuisine is no longer the sole province of the fine-dining scene. Thankfully for all of us, there has been an explosion of neighborhood eateries that have raised the bar for anyone contemplating opening a restaurant in the 'hood.

A number of San Diego's older communities, such as North Park, University Heights and Hillcrest, have attracted talented chefs eager to bring haute cuisine to the masses. Who would have guessed, for example, that a moderately priced neighborhood dining spot would include an *amuse-bouche* (a complimentary starter) and palate cleanser with dinner?

Yet that's exactly what you get at Better Half in Hillcrest, where chef John Robert Kennedy seems to relish surprising diners with gourmet offerings you would only expect to get at an upscale establishment.

Don't be surprised sometimes to find the decibel level at these eateries to be a bit high, but the inviting atmosphere and sophisticated cooking definitely make up for it.

ALEXANDER'S

3391 30th St., North Park; (619) 281-2539; reservations (619) 804-4338. alexanderson30th.com

Opened by the family that owns Old Venice in Point Loma, this comfy restaurant is definitely a cut above many of the traditional neighborhood Italian eateries. For one, the romantic, all-white decor, from the carrera marble countertops to the vinyl banquettes, creates a soothing atmosphere both inside the restaurant and on the candle-lit back patio.

Forget staying away from carbs here: dinner always starts with a basket of warm, crispy garlic bread. While the menu does not stray too far from conventional Italian fare, the food is uniformly good and full of robust flavors.

Alexander's is best known for its signature pizzas, served on large silver pedestals and big enough to share. A favorite is the White Room, adorned with white elephant garlic, ricotta cheese, mozzarella, basil, chicken and pesto.

You can also choose from a number of pasta specialties or try one of the steak, seafood or chicken dishes. While a little rich, the Chicken Florentine is wickedly good, stuffed with spinach, sun-dried tomatoes, pine nuts and imported cheeses and served with angel-hair pasta in a pesto cream sauce.

If time is of the essence, remember, you can always order one of Alexander's 13-inch pizzas to go.

Dinner nightly.



Farmhouse Cafe's desserts include exotically flavored handmade chocolates.

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BETTER HALF

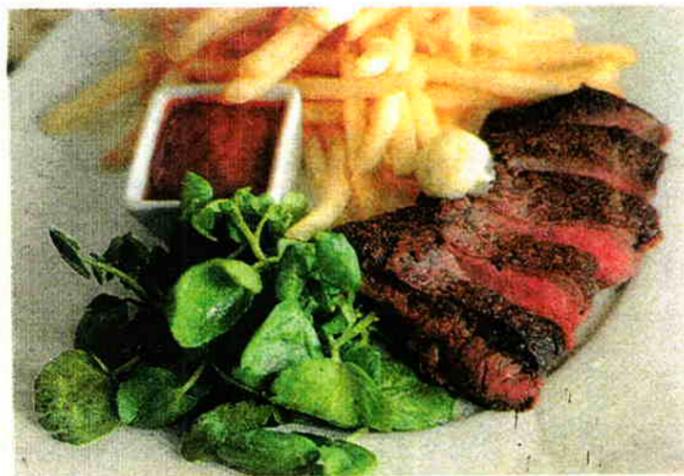
127 University Ave., Hillcrest; (619) 543-9340. thebetterhalfbistro.com

Chef Kennedy, who came here from Cafe One Three, clearly shows his passion for innovative gourmet preparations in the menu items he creates.

For starters, there's always a *tart du jour*, where Kennedy will wow you with his whimsical pairing of ingredients. Another seductive starter is the eye-popping "leaning tower of beets," presented as a cylinder of red and white chiogga beets and diced tomato, served with spring greens.

The menu is always changing, but one of my favorite dishes from earlier this year was the

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The tender grilled flat-iron steak at Farmhouse Cafe is topped with blue-cheese butter and accompanied by slender fries.

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steamed mussels, immersed in a creamy broth flavored with curry and saffron. Also expertly prepared were the bison ribs, finished with an ever-so-subtle glaze of watermelon, mint and bourbon.

For wine lovers interested in sampling a wide variety of vintages without having to purchase multiple bottles, the Better Half offers its wines in half bottles. The concept is even incorporated into the decor, which features the miniature bottles shelved inside along one wall and outside on individual ledges.

On Sundays, Better Half is also open for brunch, with a menu with a strong Southern influence.

Dinner Tuesday through Sunday.

FARMHOUSE CAFE

2121 Adams Ave., University Heights;
(619) 269-9662.
farmhousecafesd.com

Nothing satisfies quite like the warm intimacy of a cozy Parisian bistro, and when the French fare is as pleasing as the atmosphere, you'll feel like you've struck gold. That is exactly what you can expect from Farmhouse Cafe, a small but sophisticated eatery that debuted this year and quickly gained a strong following.

San Diego chef-owner Olivier Bioteau and wife Rochelle capture the essence of what we like about those French neighborhood bistros. The rustic, simple decor, spiced up with a collection of wooden mallards, is secondary to the superb seasonal dishes Bioteau turns out.

Typical of what one would expect to get at a French bistro is the creamy chicken liver mousse, perfectly pink in the middle and accompanied by pickled vegetables. More contemporary is the caramelized onion flat bread, a cracker-crisp appetizer topped with a winning combination of sweet onion, bacon and parmesan, drizzled with a balsamic reduction.

From time to time, you will find duck à l'orange on the menu. The version I had was prepared as thin slices of tender meat with a sweet citrus sauce, garnished with spinach leaves and orange segments.

Carnivores will swoon over the grilled flat-iron steak, remarkably tender for this cut of meat, accompanied by slender frites.

Not all neighborhood restaurants excel at dessert, but Bioteau, a certified chocolatier, has a winning selection of sweets. One of the most popular is his assortment of exotically flavored handmade chocolates, served with a cup of coffee. It's almost like being in Paris.

Dinner Tuesday through Sunday;
brunch Saturday and Sunday.

URBAN SOLACE

3823 30th St., North Park;
(619) 295-6464. urbansolace.net



Comfort food, such as mussels with smoked tomato butter and warm cheese biscuits, is the specialty at Urban Solace. *Charlie Neuman / Union-Tribune*

Aptly named, this eatery is where you want to head if you're craving comfort food, be it flaky biscuits, mac 'n' cheese or dumplings. While chef Matt Gordon doesn't hail from the South, there's no question much of the fare is reminiscent of Southern cooking.

Flaky cheese biscuits, perfection themselves even without the accompanying orange-honey butter, are positively addictive, as are the sweet-potato fries, served with a blue cheese buttermilk dressing. Pulled chicken and buttermilk dumplings will remind you of a rich chicken soup, and the sweet corn spoon bread, offered as a side, is down-home cooking at its best, moist and full of corn kernels.

Desserts are homey as well, like the "Not So Red" Velvet Cake with cream-cheese frosting and the restaurant's interesting take on French toast, served

with vanilla-bean ice cream and a roasted apple doused in black cherry soda.

Chef Matt Gordon has introduced some new fall menu items, such as a Dungeness Crab "Pop Tart" encased in a fennel pastry crust, and a seafood stew simmered in an herbed tomato broth with lemon oil and pepper crème fraîche.

In keeping with its Southern style, Urban Solace offers a bluegrass brunch every Sunday on its patio, with live music.

Lunch and dinner daily, brunch Sunday.