

wweek.com Willamette Week Online | Portland Oregon News and Culture April 25th thru May 1st



HOME WWIRE NEWS CULTURE MUSIC FOOD SCREEN WW PRESENTS CLASSIFIEDS MATCHMAKER

Friday, April 27th, 2007

## Refresher courses

ISSUE #33.24 • CULTURE • CULTURE FEATURE

Our critics revisit two American classics: Roux and Red Star.

Email | Print | Rate It! | 0 comments

Digg It | deLicio.us



RABBIT at Roux  
IMAGE: Jenna Biggs

BY HEIDI YORKSHIRE & KEVIN ALLMAN | 503-243-2122

[April 25th, 2007] Two successful Portland establishments specializing in classic American cuisine recently installed new chefs: downtown's Red Star Tavern, in the Hotel Monaco (newly re-branded from Fifth Avenue Suites), and NoPo's Roux, a New Orleans-style restaurant that made a huge splash when it opened in the fall of 2005. We dropped in for a few refresher courses to see what was new.

In January, longtime Red Star chef Rob Pando headed for the Napa Valley and Thomas Dunklin, a Louisiana native, took over the kitchen. Dunklin's resumé includes stints at Emeril's Delmonico in New Orleans and Jan Birnbaum's Sazerac in Seattle, though reviewer Heidi Yorkshire saw few Southern directions in the newly tweaked menu.

Over at Roux, Louisiana-trained Brendan O'Donnell took the kitchen reins earlier this year from Josh Blythe, further emphasizing the restaurant's French-Creole aesthetic (fans of earthy Cajun food, look elsewhere). Reviewer Kevin Allman found some superb dinners, an unspectacular brunch, and that Portland bugaboo: wildly varying service.

### ROUX

**The Scene:** Roux's West Elm-ish booths, noise level and restrained spices are pure Portland, but O'Donnell shows a canny hand with his Louisiana menu; his innovations on classic Creole feel knowing rather than gimmicky. A handsome bar turns out fine Crescent City tipples (Sazeracs, spicy Marys, Obituary Cocktails). Service ranges from top-notch to slapdash; on one visit, an obviously overworked young woman didn't drop a trick or stop smiling, yet during a poky brunch shift, our server greeted us with, "Hi, you guys" and left us to fend for ourselves after delivering the plates. These aren't hi-you-guys prices.

**The Good:** A "croque monsieur salad" (spinach, niblets of intensely smoked ham, Gruyère, \$9) was outstandingly savory, as was the asparagus salad (\$8), tucked under microgreens flecked with duck bacon. And the pan-roast roulade of rabbit stuffed with cornbread and andouille sausage, served over candied carrots (\$22): perfection. Jambalaya was faultless (and at \$19, it better be). Dinner service was warm and professional, despite a challenging table layout and narrow aisles that could tax any waiter's bonhomie. Our excellent server whisked away an untouched drink without being asked, later murmuring, "I took that off the bill," when the check arrived.

**The Bad:** Temperature was a problem on some of the dishes; none was cold, but barely warm—not hot—was the standard. Pallid white-cheddar grits (\$3) were a thin gruel with no discernible cheesiness—fortunately, they are no longer on the menu. Adequate sides (\$12 for three) didn't match the entrees' quality or flair (whipped potatoes, a beet-and-turnip combination that was more Pearl District than Garden District). A server gently discouraged the collards with ham hocks ("They're not as good as my grandfather's, but nothing is"). She was right. Paging Grandpa to the kitchen.

**The Ripe-for-Rethinking:** Fried chicken with biscuits and gravy (\$11), which should be slap-your-mama good to justify its calories, was underspiced and just OK. Pastry chef Melissa Lehmkuhl's beignets (\$7) were tasty, but they were less crisp little pillows of sweet air than they were a version of that doughy state fair staple, funnel cakes. And, after sampling her outstanding lemon cake (a tart hybrid of cheesecake and chiffon pie) at dinner (\$7), we were disappointed to find no desserts at all at Sunday brunch; why?

advertisement

advertisement

**Our Fondest Wish:** I'd love to show up some Sunday and find the Benedict-heavy brunch menu transformed with some of the evening menu's flair and imagination.

**Roux**, 1700 N Killingsworth St., 285-1200. Dinner 5-10 pm Monday, Wednesday, Thursday; 5-11 pm Friday-Saturday, 5-9 pm Sunday; brunch 10 am-2 pm Sunday. \$\$\$\$. Expensive.

### RED STAR

### Recently in "Culture"

April 25th, 2007  
 NIGHT CABBIE • I'm about to start my shift...  
4 comments

April 25th, 2007  
 SCOOP • Gossip should have no friends  
0 comments

April 25th, 2007  
 The kindness of strangeness | Author/musician Willy Vlautin checks into Motel Life.  
0 comments

April 25th, 2007  
 Queer Window • Rogue of the weak | Confessions from the "most unpopular gay guy" in PDX.  
7 comments

April 18th, 2007  
 NIGHT CABBIE • I'm not a saint  
15 comments

April 18th, 2007  
 SCOOP • Gossip should have no friends  
3 comments

April 18th, 2007  
 The kids is a'ight | Hip-Hop 101 is in session.  
8 comments

April 18th, 2007  
 Queer Window • From the mouth of babes... | ...spew hate, intolerance and misunderstanding.  
19 comments

April 11th, 2007  
 Cavalcade of BEAUTIFUL Losers | Taking opera to the People—the Drunk People—at Someday Lounge  
2 comments

April 11th, 2007  
 Living on the fringe | Hand2Mouth and Liminal prove cheap theater doesn't have to suck.  
1 comment

Contact Us | Get a Paper | Finder

search... Go



advertising

#### Hair Stylist

Have 4 hair stations for lease at Athena Day Spa in Vancouver, Hazel Dell area. Looking for stylists with clientele to bring in. Beautiful day spa for your clients to...

#### Inclusion, Inc. is hiring 1 FTE Personal Agent

1 FTE Personal Agent Inclusion, Inc, a nonprofit support services brokerage, is accepting r?sum?s for 1 FTE Personal Agent to join our small but growing team. Our mission is to...

#### More jobs ads

**Sponsored Links:**  
WW Personals  
Musician's Market  
Portland Restaurants  
Snowboard Jackets  
Snowboards  
Portland Web Design

**The Scene:** More than 10 years after opening, Red Star's comfy, Craftsman-inflected décor has endured the test of time; giant murals, which could be titled, "Socialism's Agrarian Heroes Visit the Farmers Market," provide a colorful backdrop to one of downtown's nicest bars for grownups. Service, both at the door and tableside, has the professional polish you'd expect of a luxury hotel chain, though we were taken aback when the waiter asked us for feedback on our dinner "because our chef is new and we're still working on things." (Yes, restaurants are supposed to listen to their customers, but isn't there an approach that might not make customers feel like the chef just graduated from cooking school last week?)



**The Good:** A bliss-inducing dinnertime platter of meaty, tender, mesquite-smoked pork ribs (\$23)—the last thing you'd expect at a white-tablecloth restaurant—in a puddle of vinegar-based Carolina-style barbecue sauce with a spot-on balance of sour, sweet, salty and hot, sided with collard greens (appropriately overcooked) and a ramekin of fat borlotti beans done baked-bean style. Terrific crab cakes: lots of fresh, sweet crab, minimal filler, crisp exterior (\$10). Penn Cove mussels (\$9), found recently in a coconut curry broth served in a handsome, heat-retaining cast-iron Dutch oven. A solid hamburger on a house-baked bun, with crisp, twice-fried French fries (\$12).

**The Bad:** Red Star's unforgivable Cobb salad (\$12), a dish that should be a hotel-menu standby. Everybody knows what Cobb salad is—chicken breast, hard-boiled egg, bacon, crumbled blue cheese, avocado and tomato assembled on top of a bowl of sturdy greens, dressed with a flavorful vinaigrette—except, apparently, this kitchen, which trots out a handful of limp micro-greens, a few blobs of ill-trimmed chicken, undercooked yolk and other components, imperceptibly dressed. And how in heaven's name did "spicy candied pecans" muscle in here? Definitely not the place for a Southern touch.

**The Ripe-for-Rethinking:** The flaky chive biscuits are a soggy mismatch with the mussels. But put a basket of them on the table in place of the dull whole-wheat bread diners currently get, and they'll inspire a cult following. Then serve the mussels with a crusty bread sturdy enough to sop up their tasty broth. And what's with the macaroni and cheese (\$15), a dry moonscape of undercooked elbow macaroni, tasting faintly of Swiss cheese, spread out to cool prematurely on a monochromatic white plate?

**Our Fondest Wish:** Lunch options downtown are meager. If Dunkin' would put some of the creativity of his dinner menu into lunch, and improve the pallid versions of the classics now served, a grateful public would respond.

**Red Star**, 503 SW Alder St., 222-0005. Breakfast, lunch and dinner 6:30 am-10 pm Monday-Thursday, 8 am-11 pm Friday-Saturday, 8 am-10 pm Sunday. \$\$\$, Expensive.

Rate This Story — — — — —  
 5 average/1 vote

**Comment on the "Refresher courses" article**

Name\*:  
Email\*:  
Comment\*:  
\* = required   
NOTE: Your comment may appear in the print edition of Willamette Week.

---

**GO TO:** [Home](#) | [WWire](#) | [Willamette Week](#) | [Classifieds](#) | [Personals](#) | [Search](#) | [Editorial Archive](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Get a Paper](#) | [Food Finder](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [XML](#) | [Bug Report](#)

**EVENTS & LISTINGS:** [Music](#) | [Screen](#) | [Performance](#) | [Visual Arts](#) | [Book Events & Readings](#) | [The It List](#) | [Outdoors](#)

**ADVERTISE WITH US:** [classified advertising](#) | [display advertising](#)

[Willamette Week Newspaper & W WEEK.COM](#)

---