

Scene Magazine

Brother's Keeper

SANTA YNEZ'S RED BARN GETS REVIVED



Slow Roasted Prime Rib at the Red Barn is a longtime Santa Ynez Valley favorite

Phil Klein/News-Press photos

If you ever visited the old Red Barn in Santa Ynez, it was always a friendly, if uninspired spot. When brothers Jeff and Matt Nichols left Mattei's Tavern, they opened the very good Sides in Los Olivos. Not content, they took over Red Barn and you won't recognize the place if you're familiar with the old place. It's a new take on an old interior – hip, sleek, but comfortable and slightly rustic, with an open kitchen and an updated bar area. There are lots of wood tones and white tablecloths, without being stuffy. The menu is surprisingly tame, being very traditional with its mesquite wood-grilled steaks and chops, but also familiar and dependable.

Their Vegetable Spring Roll (\$12) is a small, burrito-shaped appetizer with a spicy mango sauce and Asian salad. There is great texture to the crisp vegetables, housed in an ideal, crisp, non-greasy shell. The sauce is thick and minimally sweet, offering a slight heat. The small salad, more like a slaw, has a very pleasant heat from the bell peppers and sesame notes and overall, there's a freshness to this roll.

The Baby Greens Salad (\$12) uses greens, Stilton cheese, poached pears, and candied walnuts, and this seems like a basic and fundamental salad. However, this version is so beautifully balanced – the nuts are fresh and crisp, the Stilton judiciously applied, and port-soaked pears are sweet and textural, without being sugary. Additionally, the vinaigrette dressing is so non-invasive as to make the simple sublime. This is nothing you couldn't do at home, but chances are you could not do it better.

The Slow Roasted Prime Rib (\$34) has long been a Valley favorite. A sizable slab of reasonably tender prime rib is served with garlic mashed potatoes and a straightforward au jus. Prime rib is always a unique food in that it tends to be popular, but there is always minimal seasoning affecting only the outlying portion. And here is where au jus plays a critical role. The basic, applied salt and

pepper enhances the meat without any artificial or manipulative seasoning, though it is subdued. The mashers are thick and creamy, the fresh veggies lean and crisp. Unless you have a voracious appetite, you'll be taking part of this home.

Their Roasted Chicken Breast (\$24) is stuffed with an herbed, goat cheese, then grilled and dished with mashed potatoes and a thick herb juice. It's easy to dismiss chicken in a restaurant, but there is a long-held proverb that if a place can prepare chicken well, then by default, they can do most things well. And Red Barn does chicken well. Tender and moist with a hint of mesquite flavor, the cheese gets a little lost tucked under the skin, but the herbed juice with rosemary and thyme is savory and earthy and perfectly complements the chicken.

The Brothers Mud Pie (\$9) has long been their staple dessert, and for good reason. An Oreo cookie crust holds luscious, house-made, coffee ice cream, and is topped with whipped-cream, chocolate shavings, caramel sauce, and whole pecans. There is, once again, a beautiful balance to the simple foods being crafted here. It's sweet, but not aggressively so, and the ice cream is smooth and rich. Red Barn succeeds because of the tried-and-true classics. The brothers are not aiming to reinvent the wheel, instead the application of consistent and customary techniques means that a fickle public gets what it wants, well executed food by people they know and trust and who can put out consistent fare.

High Points

Classic and traditional food reminiscent of their work at Mattei's Tavern, the Nichols brothers continue their dependable offerings.

Low Points

This isn't the place for innovative cuisine.

Brothers Restaurant at the Red Barn

3539 Sagunto St., Santa Ynez
688-4142, brothersredbarn.com
Hours: Lunch daily 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.,
dinner nightly 5:30 p.m. to 9 p.m.

Food: ★★★★★

Service: ★★★★★
(Table)

Total: ★★★★★

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