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Mike Dunne: In a glass by itself

Folsom's Manderes offers brews aplenty – and an inventive menu to go with them

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Latin is being revived, thanks not to educators or prelates but to restaurateurs. In quick succession, two restaurants with Latin-inspired names have opened hereabouts.

In Sacramento, there's Tuli Bistro, its name derived from the Latin verb variously defined as "to bear," "to bring" and "to produce."

And in Folsom, there's Manderes, derived from the Latin mandere, meaning "to chew."

Presumably, there's room there to accommodate drinking.

That's what guests should be in the mood for when they head to Manderes. And specifically, their thirst had best be for beer, though the restaurant also has a limited but intriguing wine list.

Manderes offers 20 microbrews on tap. The restaurant's slogan bluntly boasts "no crap on tap," with the selection including such icons of the brewing trade as Anderson Valley Boont Amber, Chimay White and Racer 5.

And then there's the fat and smartly written beer list, which runs through about 100 bottled beers with descriptions comprehensive, intelligent and helpful. There's even a "reserve" section at the back, with a few rare beers selling for up to \$20 per 750-milliliter bottle.

The beers have been rounded up from all over – Australia, Nicaragua, Ireland, Italy, Canada, Finland, Chile and elsewhere, as well as the United States.

Their frequently light and amusing names help explain why Americans traditionally have had a more comfortable relationship with beer than wine: Mt. Shasta Shastafarian Porter, Flying Dog in Heat Wheat, He'Brew Genesis Ale, Moose Drool, Lumpy Gravy, Kilt Lifter.

Owner Brent Whited takes beer seriously – it's served at correct temperatures, customarily in the traditional glasses and mugs that brewers think best show their products – but no one need be a beer snob to start exploring the inventory.

The staff obligingly and quickly volunteers to bring complimentary shooters of any of the

draft beers that arouse a guest's curiosity.

As we began one such exercise, my sense of smell got thrown not by the beers but by the menu that also had arrived at our table. The menus are made of some sort of plastic that smells uncannily like a "corked" wine, which is to say a wine whose fruity aroma has been succeeded by a musty odor commonly attributed to contamination by a poor cork.

It was no big deal, and once past it we found the Manderes menu manageable yet varied. In mixing staples of the traditional pub (fries, burgers, onion rings, shrimp cocktails) with dishes more modern and creative (Korean grilled beef, beer-marinated pork, sautéed tiger shrimp), Manderes also provides a style of contemporary American cooking that compliments the caliber of the restaurant's beers.

Not a lot of the food is prepared from scratch on the premises, but the chefs, Juan Mendoza and Paul Davis, attempt to avoid predictability by dressing up the usual with the unusual.

For one, "cusabi" sauce, a blend of cucumber and wasabi, added an exhilarating note of spice to a standard serving of fries (\$5.99). Similarly, a robust cucumber kimchi provided prickly spiciness to the sweetness of the bulgogi – thin slices of beef marinated and grilled Korean-style (\$15.99).

Beer, naturally, is insinuated into some dishes, but not convincingly. According to the menu, the restaurant's "signature dish" is the pork chop marinated with a Belgian-style beer brewed in Maine (\$18.99). The intent apparently is to give the meat some tang, but the effect was lost on me, though the chop was thick, moist and tender, with a sweet and caramelized crust, which may have been enough to ask of the beer. Unfortunately, the mashed potatoes on which the pork was served were tepid, while the mango coleslaw looked to be missing mango, though it was fresh, creamy and fruity with raisins.

Grilled chicken that the menu described as marinated and basted with a glaze based on one of the beers by the Trappist monks of Chimay had a good story going for it, but not much impact (\$12.99).

Any restaurant that celebrates beer needs a first-rate hamburger, and the Manderes half-pound Angus burger is juicy, rich and loaded with the requisite lettuce, tomato and pickles. It comes with a choice of two sides, which in our case were big, sweet and toasty onion rings and a green salad (\$9.49). Incidentally, salads at Manderes, included with several dishes, were first-rate, the produce bright and fresh, the dressings applied with care.

The only dessert available during our visits was a weird confection called "xango" – deep-fried cheesecake looking like spring rolls pierced with pastry sticks dusted with cinnamon and sugar (\$7.49). It was accompanied with ice cream and fresh mandarin wedges and slices of mango, which would have been enough on their own, and more refreshing.

This was the second time within a week that we ran into deep-fried cheesecake, which could be a sign of an unfortunate trend, given that the technique adds nothing aesthetically pleasing to cheesecake.

Manderes is Whited's first restaurant, which in its artful design clearly was influenced by his previous career as a manager with La-Z-Boy Furniture Galleries. The sophisticated color scheme runs to burgundy and rosewood, one-blade ceiling fans bring a touch of whimsy to the room, a circle motif subtly suggests another round of beers, and banquettes along three sides of the room offer views of three TVs over the bar.

Be forewarned that as the place fills, the noise rises to a level that some diners will find uncomfortable. Also be aware that a trip to the restroom requires stepping outside, though it is attached.

Servers were personable, attentive and engaged, but pacing could be sluggish.

Incidentally, Manderes is pronounced "man-DARE-es," which helps explain how the name got chosen. As Whited and business partner Dave Matthews renovated the quarters, a suggestion by one of them often was met by the other with the comment, "Man, I dare you." In time, that challenge got retooled into the more manageable Manderes.

Manderes

402 E. Bidwell St., Folsom

(916) 986-9655

2 1/2 stars/\$\$\$

FOOD: Standard pub fare – shrimp cocktails, onion rings, burgers – is supplemented with more contemporary and creative dishes that suggest a hip brasserie: New York steaks, lobster ravioli, Korean beef, pork chops.

AMBIENCE: The blockish quarters have been spiffed up with a rosewood and burgundy color scheme, fashionable furnishings and a clever circle motif that anticipates the wet imprint left on napkins and tables by dewy beer glasses.

HITS: The poetry of modern beer marketing – Dead Guy Ale, Lumpy Gravy, Moose Drool, Kilt Lifter – flows on and on through the most comprehensive and entertaining selection of brews in the region.

MISSES: Despite an acoustic ceiling, noise reigns as the place nears capacity.

HOURS: 11 a.m.-11 p.m. daily

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