

NORTHSIDE

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Newly Notable: Comstock Saloon

Beloved bartenders Jeff Holinger and Jonny Raglin know a thing or two about pairing fabulous cocktails with fabulous food—they are part of the team that helped pioneer the concept at Absinthe Brasserie & Bar. Their latest venture, named for Henry Comstock and the Comstock Lode, has settled into the historic Edwardian space that once housed the San Francisco Brewing Company, which they have restored to its 1907 glory.

The menu is based on turn-of-the-century saloon fare to pair with classic cocktails such as the Manhattan, Sazerac, Pisco Punch, and John Collins. My favorite, though, is the Barkeep's Whimsy—when you are in such capable hands, why not trust them to create something especially for you? On one of our visits, the barkeep whipped up “The Northsider”—a smooth, sophisticated concoction of Royal Combier orange liquor, Luigi Francoli grappa, Garnier Chartreuse (a cordial originated by the monks of Grand Chartreuse), and a dash of Angostura bitters.

The head “grub slinger” is Fremont native Carlo Espinas, a young chef who has already compiled an impressive resume that includes stints with Chris Cosentino at Incanto, where he learned the importance of utilizing the whole animal. As opening chef at Piccino Cafe, Espinas's Italian-California cuisine was lauded by local press as well as *Gourmet* magazine and the *New York Times*. Most recently, he mastered cooking in the fireplace of Oakland's critically acclaimed Camino under chef Russell Moore.

For his menu at Comstock, Espinas painstakingly researched cookbooks from the late 1800s and early 1900s and came up with a selection



Fried seafood cocktail



Barkeep's Whimsy: “The Northsider”

of popular dishes from that era. His approach is like his menu—simple and rustic with attention to detail. Standout starters include pickled eggs on rye toast (\$5.50), corn and jalapeno fritters (\$8) and house-made pulled-pork patties in a warm, fluffy biscuit dubbed “pig in a biscuit” (\$8). Fried seafood cocktail (\$12.50) includes crisp squid, oysters and shrimp perched around cool, refreshing cocktail sauce. On the picnic plate (\$14) you'll find country ham, bean salad, house-made sauerkraut, pickled cherries, and a velvety chicken liver spread that stole the show. Chicken fried rabbit is actually what it sounds like (\$13)—pieces of rabbit with a delicate golden crust served with pepper vinegar to add a little kick. Clams, spicy sausage, boiled potatoes, and corn (\$16.50) are homey and satisfying in a simmering broth, and you can't go wrong with the hamburger steak with caramelized onions and gravy (\$17). The big-ticket item is the beef shank and bone marrow potpie (\$17.50), but if you order it, plan on not eating much else—it's one of the richest dishes I've eaten in ages.

They're still working out a few minor kinks (on both of our visits, the crust on the potpie could have been browner and flakier, and I'd like to see Espinas balance the shank and marrow with a few vegetables and some gravy so it's not quite as dense), but Comstock's food stands up to those impressive cocktails quite well, and with a little more time I'm sure it will get even stronger.

A lot of the new trends I'm seeing (and liking) in eateries right now are happening at Comstock—chicken liver spreads, throwback cocktails, simple but thoughtful menus, and serving the same menu all day into the wee hours. So belly up to the barkeep and ask for “The Northsider,” grab a comfy, high-backed booth, and order some tasty grub every Tuesday through Friday from noon to 2 a.m., Saturday from 2 p.m. to 2 a.m., and Sunday from 2 p.m. to midnight.

Comstock Saloon: 155 Columbus Avenue (near Broadway), Monday–Friday 11:30–2 a.m., Saturday 2 p.m.–2 a.m., 415-617-0071, www.comstocksaloon.com