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Dining Out



Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

Sliced pickled eggs fanned over rye toast at Comstock.

Barbary flavor at Comstock

What happens when two of San Francisco's best bartenders leave their jobs and open a bar and restaurant near North Beach? Pandemonium.

You'll likely find people at the Comstock Saloon lined up three deep, a pianist pounding out tunes on the mezzanine, the constant background cadence of cocktails being shaken and an ever-rising noise level that makes a revving motorcycle seem like white noise.

Owners Jeff Hollinger and Jonny Ragl in added a splash of Barbary Coast to the space that for two decades was San Francisco Brewing Co. They left the 100-year-old blue and white tile floor and tin ceiling in the quieter dining area sequestered in a room behind the bar. They

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FOOD

Flavors of Barbary at S.F. saloon

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cleaned up the Rube Goldberg fans that swirl slowly down the length of the 1907 ornate mahogany bar, fronted with stools on metal claw-foot posts. They also added a 5-foot bronze statue of Emperor Norton above the tortoise-shell plaque honoring him. Vintage bar paraphernalia and a row of high-backed banquettes across from the bar lend a cocoonlike feel.

While cocktails — some of the best in the city — are at the forefront, Comstock also offers a menu that includes rib-sticking classics. The largest category is given over to Snacks, which include a crock of pickles (\$4.50), cheddar crackers with pepper jelly (\$4) and sausage patties, moist and slight-

Comstock Saloon

155 Columbus Ave. (at Kearny Street), San Francisco
(415) 617-0071 or comstocksaloon.com
Lunch and dinner 11:30 a.m.-2 a.m.
Monday-Friday, 2 p.m.-2 a.m. Saturday. Full bar. No reservations. Credit cards accepted. Street parking, generally difficult.

Overall: ★★

Food: ★★½

Service: ★★

Atmosphere: ★★

Prices: \$\$

(Moderate: Most main courses \$11-\$17)

Noise rating: 6

Too noisy for normal conversation (80+ decibels)

Pluses: Excellent bar food, particularly snacks such as pickled eggs; generally exceptional cocktails.



Photos by Liz Hafalla / The Chronicle

Comstock Saloon adds a splash of Barbary Coast to the former San Francisco Brewing Co. space.



The wine list

The heart of the beverage menu is cocktails. Jonny Raglin and Jeff Hollinger know their stuff, and the drinks are always well crafted. While you can get a host of classic cocktails (\$8-\$11), I ask for the Barkeep's Whimsy (\$10), where you tell the waiter what type of spirits you like and let the staff take it from there.

Anchor Steam and Trumper Pils are on tap, supplemented by several bottled beers, including premium brews such as Malheur Champagne fermented ale (\$29) and 2007 Sierra Celebration Ale (\$10).

Most of the 30 wines are chosen for their bold aggressive flavors, which go well with such dishes as the corned beef special we had one night. Markups are reasonable; one of the best deals is the 2005 Jayson Pahlmeyer Napa Valley Bordeaux blend (\$65) that retails for about \$50. The seven wines by the glass include the 2009 Kathryn Kennedy Sauvignon Blanc (\$8.50) and the 2006 Tallulah Shaking Ridge Ranch Grenache blend (\$8.50). If you bring your own wine, corkage is \$20.

ly spicy, tucked into buttery biscuits (\$8).

You know this is a special kind of place when the requisite peanuts or Goldfish are replaced by crisp, salty fried fava beans (\$3.50). Their mealy crunch wakes up the palate for the next sip of John Collins (\$8) or Pisco Punch (\$10).

Chef Carlo Espinas, who came from Piccino's Cafe in Dogpatch, also does a fine job with corn and jalapeno fritters (\$8) topped with paper-thin coins of chiles. They're hot, puffy and tender, with just a very narrow crisp edge and right on flavors where the heat of the jalapenos are tamed by the sweetness of corn.

My favorite, however, is the sliced pickled eggs fanned over rye toast (\$6.50) "Hangtown style," which includes a slice of bacon, the pickled eggs and a drizzle of oyster vinaigrette. Accompanied by the Manhattan (\$9) with the rich sting of bourbon and the touch of sweet vermouth, it raises bar food to new heights.

The rest of the menu consists of a soup of the day, which on one of our visits was a parsley root chowder (\$7.50) thick with potatoes, corn and herbs; a very good Little Gem salad (\$8.50) with cucumbers and buttermilk; and a more complex chicory salad (\$12) with fried green tomatoes, sardines and a mayonnaise dressing flavored with tuna. It's substantial enough for a light meal, or to split as a starter.

On another visit, the fisherman's salad (\$13) featured a filet of grilled salt cod arranged over green beans that would have been better if cooked a little longer, and pickled vegetables that added interest but didn't overshadow.

Appetizers include chicken-fried rabbit (\$13.50), chunks of golden battered meat, served with a crostini topped with rillettes, pepper vinegar for a dash of spice and slices of celery for a refreshing crunch. The kitchen does all the work on the oysters Rockefeller gratin (\$14.50), where the seafood is removed from the shell and placed on a bed of spinach with herbs and a rich, buttery sauce.

Main courses are so highly seasoned — read salty — that they encourage you to have another cocktail, which is fine by me. On one visit I had the hamburger steak (\$17), served open-face on a

Minuses: Service can be slow. Between the crowds and the music, it can be very loud, so have a drink or two and relax.

★★★★ Extraordinary
★★★ Excellent
★★ Good ★ Fair □ Poor

bun, covered with gravy and accompanied by an arugula and cherry tomato side dish. Clams and sausage in a spicy broth (\$16.50) packed a lot of heat tamed by the one slice of well-buttered bread.

On other visits, main courses included a grid-dled trout (\$17) with an alligator pear and smoky corn relish that covered the bottom of the plate; egg noodles with a rich sherry mushroom sauce (\$17) that reminded me of a meatless beef bourguignon; and a pot pie (\$17.50) that looked as if it had come from Swanson's — that is, until the first bite, filled with beef shank meat and rich bone marrow.

I'd recommend all three desserts, especially the maple bourbon pudding spooned over a cake (\$7), tasting something like butterscotch on steroids; a chocolate whoopee pie (\$6.50) with a



Cocktails from Jonny Raglin, pictured above, and Jeff Hollinger are the driving force behind rib-sticking fare like the fried seafood cocktail, top.

chocolate cinnamon ganache and a malted milk creme anglaise; and a cobbler of the day (\$6.50), which on one visit was sour plum.

Because the bar is the driving force, I don't expect refined service. The staff might have to check to see what the specials are each night — or even if there are any — and if you order the Barkeep's Whimsy (\$10) they may not be able to tell you exactly what you're drinking. At times there can be longer than normal pauses between courses, but overall it's convivial and fun and the

drinks are delivered without fuss.

When you see Raglin making the rounds with his handlebar mustache, long-sleeve shirt and vest, you'll think the Barbary Coast is alive and well in North Beach.

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