



DINING: Second Home the height of comfort

By Lori Midson, Special to the Rocky

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"I just want something light. Really light. Do you understand?"

Never mind that the 100-pound waif was scowling, her mouth molded into a permanent frown.

The unflinching host didn't bat an eye as he led her to her table.

"I want the burger, but no cheese and no bacon and a plain salad with the dressing on the side."

"Of course," said her server.

Like a voyeur, I watched the waif shove the bun to one side of her plate, pick at her burger and carefully measure the droplets of red wine vinegar she dribbled onto her forest of greens.

Later, as I was leaving, I noticed the woman sitting near the front door.

She had a suitcase the size of an outhouse.

Attached was an orange tag that read, "I'm heavy, bend your knees," and right there alongside it was a little diagram of two bent knees.

Why am I sharing this with you? Because if you're one of these people who insist on hauling huge suitcases with you on every trip - even though your clothes are toddler-size - and then proceed to order a naked burger with a side of weeds, sans dressing, then Second Home Kitchen & Bar is not for you.

If, however, a **French dip** (\$13), stockpiled with smoke-licked lamb scented with rosemary and shredded into tender shards that nearly dissolve in your mouth, is the kind of sustenance you seek, you have indeed found your home away from home.

That sandwich, sided with a remarkably rich and intense lamb jus bursting with flavor, single-handedly qualifies as the rock-star dish of the year.

Second Home Kitchen & Bar, the restaurant that took over the Mirepoix space in the tony JW Marriott hotel, is for all intents and purposes a celebration of comfort foods.

But while you might be thinking of all the childish connotations that comfort food conjures up, executive chef Che Frey tinkers with the formula so that while his dishes appeal to your inner child, they're implicitly adult in their lasting impressions.

A **salad of frisee, slivered almonds and endive** (\$10), for example, is bolstered by crusted lobes of goat cheese, fleshy orange conserves and a light shower of vinaigrette faint with the whisper of curry.

A **salad of barely grilled romaine leaves** (\$7) mimics a Caesar, but only insofar as the lettuce. Fanned across the stark white plate and overlaid with thin-sliced apples, blots of blue cheese and crisp crumbles of bacon, it's the next sequel to the ubiquitous Caesar - and a far better one at that.

My nose nearly dived into the **onion soup** (\$7), a deeply concentrated broth swarming with silky onions and blistered with a lid of bubbling provolone and Gruyere cheeses.

The **smoked trout dip** (\$8), which matches Colorado trout, herbed cream cheese, spinach and red onions heaped in a black cast-iron vessel, arrived stone-cold, but as its temperature mellowed, the flavors turned bigger and bolder and the traces of smoke more pronounced.

Sadly, the only pronouncement in the **beer-battered baby artichokes** (\$12) was the batter itself, a cloak of grease that doubled as a chokehold.

But the majority of Frey's dishes don't suffer from those kinds of malfunctions. To wit: The **hanger steak** (\$19), liberally salted and peppered, percolating with crimson juices and served sliced in a cast-iron skillet, is fantastic, as is the **black cod** (\$24), glazed with miso and encircled by a stir-fry of mushrooms and vibrantly green snow peas that snapped like twigs.

A few dishes, though, like the **"two-way" tuna casserole** (\$16), with its squishy noodles, mushy peas and underseasoned cream sauce, and the **soupy macaroni and cheese** (\$5), while humble and homey, failed to comfort me.

But in compensation, Second Home Kitchen & Bar has that gorgeous wine wall, a remnant of its past life as Mirepoix, shrouded in gauzy curtains, illuminated by flickering candles and glimmers of soft light from the lustrous wired chandeliers.

It also has a breezy covered patio, flanked with aspen trees and a warm fire pit.

And it has an impressive microbrew roster and a fairly priced wine list, not to mention a snazzy bar bedecked with leather chairs, plump pillows and, unfortunately, really uncomfortable banquettes that don't invite lingering.

Frey's food, however, does.

Comfortable and comforting, with hints of cosmopolitan swagger, it beckons you home - unless, of course, you live on lettuce, in which case there's a salad bar down the street.

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Second Home Kitchen & Bar

* **Grade:** B

* **Address:** 150 Clayton Lane, in the JW Marriott

* **Hours:** breakfast, lunch and dinner daily; Saturday and Sunday brunch 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.

- * **Food:** American
- * **How much:** \$8-\$12 starters, \$6-\$18 soups and salads, \$10-\$29 main dishes, \$5 sides
- * **Reservations:** recommended
- * **Noise:** boisterous in the bar but bearable in the dining room
- * **Information:** 303-253- 3000 or secondhome denver.com
- * **Parking:** complimentary valet parking with validation

Soul searching

If Denver had its own encyclopedia of dishes that do justice to down-home cooking, you'd probably find entries for buttermilk fried chicken or meatloaf, both of which are "daily dish" specials at Second Home Kitchen & Bar, alongside the braised lamb shank, New England fish fry, prime rib and rotisserie-roasted duck.

Unfortunately for me, the "daily dish" always seemed to run away with the spoon before I could get my hands on it, which means it was sold out every time I visited. I never had the opportunity to see whether the fried chicken rivals the beastly birds at **Rocky Mountain Diner** (800 18th St.), the **Castle Cafe** (403 Wilcox St.) or **Steuben's** (523 E. 17th Ave.), three of my favorite spots for fried chicken. Or how the meatloaf stacks up against the juicy version at **Bang!** (3472 W. 32nd Ave.), a ketchup-slathered slice of Americana accompanied by excellent mashed potatoes. Or whether the collard greens can hold a candle to the righteous collards at **Tom's Home Cookin'** (800 E. 26th Ave.) or **Cora Faye's Cafe** (2861 Colorado Blvd.).

But I do know this: The lamb French dip I had at Second Home Kitchen & Bar more than soothed my soul.

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