

Sassy Marie's to the Rescue

Former home of James Street Tavern gets a delectable makeover

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By Gretchen Trent, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Like a lot of Pittsburghers, Duke Britton was heartbroken when the James Street Tavern shuttered its doors in 2004 after a near 18-year run.

But he didn't start mourning in earnest until the 1896 building it once occupied on Foreland Street on the North Side -- abandoned after the revamped Legends James Street Tavern also went out of business in 2005 -- started to deteriorate.

"It was sitting there, rotting," recalls Mr. Britton, a fourth-generation North Sider. "I kept thinking, 'That's wrong. That's wrong.'"

So when his sister, Stephanie, a restaurant manager, came to him with the idea of opening her own small restaurant, he decided enough was enough. Why not purchase the building and renovate it himself? It was high time for this legendary "cathedral for jazz" to be reborn.

The siblings wouldn't be going into the venture blind: banquet manager for the Meadowood Resort in Napa Valley, Calif., Mr. Britton was also a cook for USA Gourmet in the Strip, and his sister had managed Bravo Franco on Penn Avenue, Downtown. The result is Sassy Marie's, a cozy neighborhood restaurant with seating for 68 that makes good use of the historic building's exposed brick and polished-wood paneling. It opened Feb. 19.

"We wanted a spot where adults could come for a reasonable, sane time," says Mr. Britton. "Nothing crazy and nothing wild, but plenty of sass."

The restaurant is named for the sibling's great-aunt, Marie Devlin, who owned a speakeasy off the Federal Street Extension during Prohibition. But the "Sassy" could also apply to his 92-year-old grandmother, Dorothy Matthews Welty, who performed in the building as a member of an all-girls band in the '30s and '40s and is pictured in a black-and-white photo near the restaurant's hostess stand.

The service is friendly and extremely attentive, but also kind of iffy. On a weekday night, when a girlfriend and I were one of just three parties seated at the restaurant, it took nearly 15 minutes for us to get our martinis and a half-hour for the appetizers. But on a busy Saturday night, when the adjoining bar was full and crowds were starting to file in for the live music downstairs, both drinks and food arrived promptly. Go figure.



Lake Fong, Post-Gazette
Executive chef Rich Horn, co-owner Duke Britton and pastry chef Jordan Gottlieb display some of the menu items at Sassy Marie's on the North Side.

Sassy Marie's
422 Foreland St.
North Side
412-246-0355

Hours: 11 a.m.-3 p.m. (lunch); 5-10 p.m. weekdays and 5-11 p.m. weekends (dinner); Sunday brunch 11 a.m.-3 p.m.

Basics: A cozy neighborhood tavern in a historic building with attentive service and a large selection of American-regional dishes.

Live music Friday and Saturday nights at 9 p.m., with \$5 cover for most shows.

Prices: Appetizers \$6-\$14; entrees \$9-\$28; desserts \$5-\$7.

Summary: Smoking permitted; wheelchair-accessible; major credit cards accepted. Parking in a lot on site.

Fortunately, the food as prepared by executive chef Rich Horn, who used to teach at Pennsylvania Culinary, was worth waiting for. Everything is made in house, from the creamy, chipotle-infused Southwestern Caesar dressing and fiery Salsa Roja to decadent desserts such as the flourless Chocolate Sin Cake (\$5), served with a creamy bourbon caramel sauce (it's well worth an extra 20 minutes on the treadmill).

The name "Sassy" might suggest a menu echoing the Cajun delights the Jamestown Tavern was known for. And, to be sure, several dishes make excellent use of cayenne, black pepper and onion and garlic powders. But it's mostly what Mr. Britton refers to as American regional cuisine, with a twist. For instance, Beef & Buffalo (\$13.50) is made with both ground Angus beef and ground buffalo and topped with sauteed wild mushrooms, while their signature 20-ounce Rib Eye "Cowboy" Steak (\$28) -- cut in-house and doused in a southwestern pepper rub -- is served with a smoky chipotle chimichurri sauce.

"We wanted it to be just outside the box," Mr. Britton says, "Not way out there, but something different."

The menu is divided into small plates (appetizers), table plates (meant for sharing) and large plates (traditional entrees). Despite being dressed with toasted sesame sauce and Thai chile oil, the veggie spring rolls (\$6) -- were just ho-hum. But the seared big eye ahi (\$11), crusted with a mixture of white and black sesame seeds and served with a drizzle of sweet soy sauce and a tangy mango-cabbage slaw, was delicious. Next time, I'll cut to the chase and order it as an entree. But not before detouring for the Berry, Chevre and Pecan Salad (\$7, or \$3 extra with an entree). Tossed in a sweet raspberry balsamic vinaigrette, this yummy first course pairs field greens and caramelized pecans with huge, velvety dollops of goat cheese, dried cranberries and thimble-sized blackberries.

Asked which entree was the most popular with regulars, our waitress directed us to the Blackberry Pork Tenderloin (\$16), a center-cut pork filet that's dusted with steak seasoning, grilled and then finished with a demiglace flavored with blackberries and a touch of Dijon. Hungry for something with a bit more kick, I opted for another recommended dish, Chicken Medallions Roja (\$15). I wasn't disappointed: battered in the house cheese mix of asiago and Monterey Jack, pan-fried and then baked, it reminded me of grandma's Chicken Romano. Only instead of tomato sauce and Parmesan, it was topped with a "sassy" salsa roja and a drizzle of herb-lime sour cream.

Another huge hit was the nightly fish special, a grilled jerk sea bass (\$24). I'm usually not much for fish, but this filet, which was served atop fragrant cilantro-lime jasmine rice and covered with a piquant pineapple salsa, was first-rate. So was the Blue Cheese Crusted Filet (\$18 for an 8-ounce cut, plus \$2.50 for the crust), which came with smashed redskin potatoes and steamed asparagus. It was, to quote Mike Meyer's "Coffee Talk" character, "like buttah."

Along with that Chocolate Sin Cake, desserts by pastry chef Jordan Gottlieb, who is just finishing up his studies at Pennsylvania Culinary, include a 6-inch-high Chocolate Monolith cake and Crunchberry Cheesecake. We liked the Key Lime Pie (\$5), which is made with a coconut-graham cracker crust and served with raspberry puree and whipped cream, enough to order it on consecutive visits.

There were a few disappointments. The Grilled Tex-Asian Shrimp (\$16) was perfectly cooked but both the teriyaki-hickory sauce and the accompanying peppered black beans lacked any real zip. And the oversized Blackberry Crème Brulee (\$7), while studded with rich berries and crowned with the requisite crackly, sugary crust, tasted a bit too custardy. But really, those are minor complaints and completely forgivable.