

Review: Cowboy hospitality shines at The Ranch

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The women at my table are talking excitedly about going line dancing after dinner. The men at my table are rolling their eyes, and I can see the relief on their faces when the conversation about country dancing is interrupted by the arrival of our entrees. Everyone falls silent midsentence as our jaws gape in response to a couple of cowboy rib-eye steaks. Each 36-ounce behemoth clings to a tomahawk-style bone that's at least 16 inches long. We shuffle plates around so the bones aren't hanging off the table and into the aisle where they could impale an innocent passer-by.

"I think we might be too full to go dancing after we eat these," says one of the guys. The women roll their eyes. "We're going two-stepping at the very least," responds The Blonde.

The Ranch has developed a reputation as being a steakhouse. And although technically it's not a steakhouse, I can see how people might jump to that conclusion. The bone-on cowboy rib-eye is quite possibly the best steak in all of Orange County. (I'll either confirm or revise this claim later in the year when I compile a list of the best steaks in O.C. But for now, I'm going with it.) The steak is about 3 inches thick, and while the menu lists its weight as 36 ounces, my guess is that it's actually heavier than that. Obviously, 2 pounds of beef is an obscene amount of meat for one person to consume when there's not a prize involved, so most people who order the rib-eye do so with the intention of sharing it. Even half of one of these monsters is a heck of a lot of meat. But it's not just an oversized slab of beef. This is one of the best USDA Prime steaks that money can buy.

The rib-eye is one of just three steaks on offer at The Ranch. And while seafood doesn't exactly get the short shrift, the menu does lean more heavily toward meats: pork chop, lamb chops, short ribs, pork ribs. The Ranch is oddly located in an industrial area of southeast Anaheim adjacent to the train tracks, which prompts a lot of people to jump to conclusions about its fine-dining prospects. But this is the kind of place where the wild Burgundy escargot are more expensive than the beef carpaccio, where seven flavors of dinner rolls are heated to order and where the bartenders pour more than 60 wines by the glass. And while that might sound somewhat snobbish, The Ranch is utterly unpretentious. There is, after all, a country and western dance hall next door.

Old-school cowboy hospitality is alive and well. The warbling twang of Willie Nelson and Emmylou Harris floats lightly through the air, fading in and out as the din in the dining room ebbs and flows. (The country music next door at The Saloon veers more progressive, less retro.) Gallery-worthy photographs offer black-and-white glimpses of real cowboy life. In the steakhouse tradition, the restaurant is designed so most of the seating is semicircular booths. Mercifully, the cowboy schtick doesn't feel at all like schtick. It comes across as authentic – and I say this as the son of a fifth-generation cattle rancher.

Much of the top-tier talent at The Ranch worked at one time or another at Napa Rose. That includes legendary master sommelier Michael A. Jordan, chef Michael Rossi and pastry chef David Rossi. The guy with the money is electronics baron Andrew Edwards, whose audio/visual company occupies the majority of the corporate structure that houses The Ranch. I honestly didn't expect to see Edwards playing any sort of hands-on role in his first food-service operation. But on two of my visits his presence is larger than life as he strolls in and out of the kitchen wearing his perfectly steamed Stetson hat and meticulously polished cowboy boots, grinning ear to ear, warmly greeting friends and colleagues with gentle pats on the back before slipping back into The Saloon.

The kitchen rarely misses a beat. A trio of ceviches is the perfect expression of Southern California. Shrimp mingle with heirloom cherry tomatoes and an abundance of jalapeño, Acapulco-style. Large lumps of lobster deftly two-step with mango and avocado in a blend that suggests an inspiration much farther to the south, while crab basks in a spicy coconut curry that hints at Southeast Asia.

I didn't know cowboys ate snails, but the escargot are sublime. Five supple snails are burrowed into a nest of soft hazelnut spaetzle, their spiraled shells barely visible at first through a cloud of green garlic foam. Quail from Petaluma are beautifully battered and fried, served boneless and meant to be dragged through a puddle of house-made agave mustard. Pristine beef carpaccio is made with American wagyu and tricked out with black truffles and Alba clamshell mushrooms.

Much of the produce served at The Ranch comes from the restaurant's own private farm in the foothills of Orange. And if ever there was a good argument for locavore cooking, it's the heirloom beet salad, the very best of its genre, with beets and oranges from the farm, along with watercress, almonds and crumbled, Spanish-style cheese.

The New York strip is good, but it's got nothing on the rib-eye. Far better than the strip is the lamb: two massive chops of Colorado grass-fed stock. The butcher has left just enough fat ringing the lamb's girth to create the perfect crust, a deeply caramelized funk that I'm careful to ration so that every bite of lamb also includes some crust. It's served with a fricassee of sorts that involves chickpeas, olives and Moroccan-style lamb sausage, but the chops themselves are so remarkable that I catch myself forgetting to eat the chickpeas.

Sustainably raised Chilean sea bass nestles atop the perfect lobster risotto, surrounded by a nage of Meyer lemon and vanilla. Pork ribs are billed as sweet and sticky. I think they are probably too sweet, too saucy and not quite smoky enough to satisfy a real cowboy, but they are undeniably meaty. And as this style of overly sweet barbecue goes, they are delicious.

All of the entrees are smartly composed with their own vegetables, but some of the best side dishes are the additional a la carte items like the ultra-rich lobster mac and a truly revelatory green bean casserole.

Desserts are divided into modern vs. classic, and it's hard to go wrong in either direction. My least favorite is the sticky toffee pudding, which tastes too much of pure butter and not enough of hot gooey caramel. My hands-down favorite is the pecan pie, which is quite unlike any pecan pie I've ever tasted. It's not one of those super-sticky, absurdly sweet Southern-style pies but rather a refined and elegant pastry that tastes like it's never come within a mile of a bottle of Karo syrup. And while it's probably The Ranch's most egregious deviation from real cowboy cuisine, it's also one of the finest things you'll ever eat.

Correction: An earlier version of this story identified the rib-eye steak as 32 ounces. The steak is actually listed on the menu as 36 ounces.

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