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By Mike Dunne
Bee Restaurant Critic

...The community finally is attracting the sorts of fashionable, industrious, vibrant restaurants commonly associated with Up Valley hamlets.

The new wave of restaurateurs say they were drawn downtown largely by the availability of property they could afford, by the city's energetic rebirth and by restrictions on new development Up Valley.

"This is the last frontier in the valley," says Alexis Handelman, one of the early foodies to take a gamble on Napa. That was 10 years ago, when she opened Alexis Baking Company along Third Street on the western edge of downtown.

Though the city's restaurant scene is going uptown, it doesn't yet have the attitude, polish or prices associated with dining destinations Up Valley. Dishes run more to the down-home and readily identifiable, though creativity and refinement aren't difficult to find.

"We all have a very personal style," says Handelman of her fellow Napa chefs. "Our food speaks to the customer base we have here, and Napa is a working peoples' town. Up Valley you have a lot of people who live there only on weekends, and a lot of people who are more well-to-do. Napa is a very middle-class town, so the food here has to speak to the locals as well as to the people we serve on weekends."

If you're looking for old-fashioned but trendy comfort food, Napa's got it, she says. "A lot of people here are doing hash, pot roast and mashed potatoes with gravies, stuff people love. It's not so much towering foods and fancy sauces as honest, straightforward food made by people who know what they are doing."

Not that salads made with the likes of grilled freshwater eel, pickled beets and arugula can't be found in Napa. Greg Cole has been serving that sort of fare since opening his intimate *Celadon* along the Napa River four years ago.

When it comes to appealing to locals and tourists alike, no Napa restaurateur walks both sides of the culinary street more deftly than Cole. His *Celadon* appeals primarily to visitors in search of adventurous, artistic global cooking customarily associated with tony Up Valley restaurants.

On the other hand, his second Napa restaurant, *Cole's Chop House*, which opened this spring, is pure traditional American steakhouse, seemingly catering to oldtime Napans with a hunger for grilled ribeye and creamed spinach. Judging by the crowds packing the place, however, plenty of out-of-towners also welcome that sort of hearty and direct fare.

Cole figures 75 percent of his customers are local residents, 25 percent tourists. "It's probably the opposite Up Valley," says Cole. "But when the American Center for Wine, Food and the Arts opens, that will change. A few celebrity chefs will come into town with their multi-million-dollar restaurants," he predicts.

In the meantime, Napa isn't lacking for varied, interesting, high-value dining options. Here are several we found exciting:

Celadon

Tucked behind the Main Street Exchange, an office complex that also includes Napa's born-again Opera House, cozy and airy Celadon is difficult to find.

But don't give up the search. For the diligent, the reward is a bold and lively take on what owner Cole and chef de cuisine Zollan Ruiz call "global comfort food with an Asian influence."

Not everything on the menu has an Asian angle, but the food clearly bears the artistic signature of Ruiz, who for four years before moving to Celadon was the sous chef for Hiro Sone at the high-profile French-Japanese restaurant Terra in St. Helena.

This is especially so among the dishes listed under "small plates" on the menu, such as spring rolls of ginger-braised duck with hoisin sauce (\$9). This also is where Ruiz offers a "satay of the day," which the other evening consisted of deftly grilled salmon with a rich peanut sauce, ahi tartare stacked with delicate wonton-like chips and grilled eggplant in hoisin sauce (\$8).

Bigger plates include grilled duck with a parsnip puree and a sauce of sun-dried cherries (\$18), and an achiote-rubbed pork chop with black beans, smoked bacon and roasted-corn relish (\$16).

Celadon takes advantage of its small quarters with an open kitchen near diners, a gleaming floor of honey maple and a patio with a pretty pocket garden.

Celadon, 1040 Main St., Napa, serves lunch 11:30 a.m.-2 p.m. Monday through Friday, dinner 5-9 p.m. Monday through Saturday. For reservations: (707) 254-9690.

Cole's Chop House

Cole looks to be almost as fond of fine woodwork as he is of fine food. The floor of Cole's Chop House is a dark, rich, shiny Douglas fir, dating from the building's construction in 1886. The structure itself is immense, with a spacious mezzanine to hold jazz bands on weekends.

The building's stunning, hand-hewn native-stone walls, which over the years have housed assorted businesses (including undertaker parlor and the Duck Pin Bowling Alley), have been reinforced to meet contemporary seismic standards, and the structure breezed through Napa's recent earthquake without a fleck of lime-based mortar drifting onto that fetching floor.

Chef Jesus Mendez tends a classic American steakhouse menu with the likes of oysters Rockefeller (\$9), Chicago prime-grade Porterhouse steak dry aged for 21 days (\$35) and New Zealand lamb chops (\$22).

Desserts are in the same vein, including bananas Foster (\$7), pecan pie (\$7) and a Scotch whisky bread pudding so cinnamony it could double as French toast the next morning (\$7).

The wine list at Cole's Chop House offers the kind of depth and breadth normally expected of classy Up Valley restaurants, running most industriously and most appropriately to Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon.

Cole's Chop House, 1122 Main St., Napa, serves dinner only, 5-10 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, 5-9 p.m. Sundays. For reservations: (707) 224-6328.

Pearl

No restaurant in Napa is more exciting than Pearl, especially if you are seated on the patio, at a table up against Pearl Street.

Traffic bound southeast on Polk Street must make a sharp left to continue south on Pearl Street. Every approaching car we watched one recent evening successfully maneuvered through the curve, but one speeding roadster did it more with a squealing sideways skid than graceful turn, providing a bit more drama than expected.

We may owe our well-being to the hex signs. Pearl - cozy, friendly, eccentric - is appointed with all kinds of bright, geometric hex signs, some on wood, some on metal, some on masonite, all by Napa artist Kathy Dennett. The signs share the space with painted-steel sculptures by fellow Napa artist Richard Mendelson, giving the quarters the look and feel of an art gallery as much as bistro.

At Pearl, two veteran Napa Valley restaurateurs, Nickie and Pete Zeller, have created an amiable, offbeat dining destination where the food is a little bit Mexican, a little bit Asian, a little bit Italian and all Californian in its fresh, local, seasonal ingredients.

Oysters are at the top of the menu for good reason - they're the restaurant's signature. They come from a variety of purveyors and are prepared in a variety of ways. On the night we dropped in, they were from Hog Island at Tomales Bay. We ordered an assortment at \$9.95 per half dozen.

Fresher or more fanciful oysters haven't crossed this palate. Two slipped down the throat with a prickly salsa verde and feta cheese. Two disappeared under a sweet and spicy barbecue sauce. And two were dripping with balsamic vinegar and sweet butter, a dressing whose silken texture and rich flavor was so fitting we were about to order another round when we glanced again at the menu and wondered what "Guerrero-style corn" (\$3.50) was all about.

Simple perfection is all: two short cobs of hot grilled corn splashed with a squeeze of lime, a shower of melting cotija cheese and a squirt of pleasantly addictive chili cream. (Guerrero is the state in Mexico where the dish originated.)

Pearl also offers imaginative individual pizzas, including one on which the sweetness of finely diced grilled eggplant was complemented by the smoke of a rich bacon (\$7.95); several sandwiches, including one of tender New York steak sweetened with a spicy housemade steak sauce and grilled red onions (\$10.95); and entrees like pan-roasted halibut with shiitake mushrooms in a Sherry and shallot vinaigrette (\$19.95).

The Zellers have been a part of the Napa Valley dining scene since 1976, when Nickie Zeller was an original partner of The Diner in Yountville, which Pete Zeller

joined as a cook in 1984. Before opening Pearl, they owned the distinguished Brown Street Grill (now gone) in downtown Napa from 1991 to 1997.

Pearl, 1339 Pearl St., Napa, serves lunch 11:30 a.m.-2 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, dinner 5:30-9 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday, to 9:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays. For reservations: (707) 224-9161.

Tuscany Restaurant

Open just since June, Tuscany Restaurant has been a smash hit from the start, drawing huge and convivial crowds that don't seem to mind at all waiting on the sidewalk out front for a seat at bar or dining room.

Reservations are highly recommended, though drop-ins may be able to snag a toasty seat at the stone counter facing the rotisserie of the open kitchen along the back wall.

The turning, glistening legs of lamb are entertaining, all right, but few counters of exhibition kitchens put diners as close to the action. Conversation with the cooks is easy when they aren't concentrating on pulling pork loin off the mesquite grill (\$16).

One of those cooks, incidentally, is executive chef Aram Chakerian, a veteran of nine years with the Piatti chain, including a stint as sous chef in Sacramento. At Tuscany, he oversees a modestly priced menu of straightforward Italian fare whose clear flavors and simple presentation would be at home in a trattoria in the Tuscan countryside.

A meaty, smoky and lean rabbit from the rotisserie was enriched with pancetta and complemented with finely roasted Yukon Gold potatoes, asparagus and turnips (\$15), while creamy risotto was layered with thick slices of tri-tip, mushrooms and buttery Teleme cheese (\$17).

Tuscany Restaurant, 1005 First St., Napa, serves dinner only 5-10 p.m. Sunday through Thursday, to 11 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays. For reservations: (707) 258-1000.

Uva Trattoria Italiana

Candido Di Terlizzi, a native of Bari in southern Italy, arrived in Napa two years ago from Berkeley, where he owned Cafe Candido.

He took over roomy downtown quarters previously occupied by Brown Street Grill and transformed the space into a boisterous trattoria with large parties celebrating at long tables under the high, arching ceiling.

Uva still principally is a local hangout, though more visitors are discovering the place.

Di Terlizzi and his head chef, Fabrizio Protopapa, oversee a long, diverse and largely southern-Italian menu celebrated by locals for its daily seafood specials; pastas, especially the gnocchi with either pesto or pomodoro sauce (\$5.50 small plate, \$9.50 large); and fried calamari with aioli (\$5 small, \$9 large).

Pizzas, panini sandwiches, veal dishes and ribeye steak also round out the menu, but Uva was a happenstance find for us after dinner elsewhere, so we settled for dessert alone.

The Sicilian cannoli was one big firm tube of pastry, filled with a delicately sweet and creamy ricotta and chocolate (\$3.95), while the panna cotta (baked cream) hit heights of refinement rarely achieved; it was smooth and rich, and brightened with a jammy strawberry sauce (\$5).

Uva Trattoria Italiana, 1040 Clinton St., Napa, serves meals 11:30 a.m.-9:30 p.m. Monday through Friday, 5-9:30 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays. For reservations: (707) 255-6646.

Alexis Baking Company

While celebrated largely for its baked goods, especially the chocolate caramel cake, chocolate poundcake, blueberry muffins and specialty breads, Alexis Baking Company also is a casual cafe where the weekend huevos rancheros are so enduringly popular that owner Alexis Handelman doesn't dare remove them from the menu.

Soups based on stocks she prepares from scratch, focaccia sandwiches and salads help round out the selections.

Alexis Baking Company, 1517 Third St., Napa, is open 6:30 a.m.-6 p.m. Monday through Friday, 7:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturdays, 8 a.m.-2 p.m. Sundays. For more information: (707) 258-1827.