

Dining Out

Gabriella Boston

Beer, burgers, pizza, fun fit into Matchbox

The delightful Matchbox in Chinatown used to be true to its namesake: small and packed. During a recent expansion, the self-styled “vintage pizza bistro” tripled its seating capacity, so it’s no longer tiny, but it is still — you guessed it — packed.

The wait on a recent Wednesday night was about 30 minutes, and the table service was tardy at times? but you can’t help but love this place. The beer offerings are great and include everything from Belgium’s excellent Chimay (touted as one of the finest beers in the world; we agree) to America’s unpretentious Pabst Blue Ribbon. The ambience is energetic, young, fun and a tad loud, just like the clientele. The food is first-class.

The menu items, however, don’t look that remarkable on the page: “mini-burgers” and “spinach salad” could be the offerings of any cheap-eats chain. At Matchbox, the most is

Simple food prepared well

made of each ingredient, flavor combination and presentation.

Take the spinach salad — fresh and crisp spinach combined with fresh basil, roasted pear tomatoes and candied walnuts in a warm apple-smoked-bacon vinaigrette — and you have a dish that could make its home at a much fancier restaurant where tables are covered in white linen (at Matchbox, the tables are bare wood and include a glass-enclosed inlay in the center featuring a matchbox) and with a larger price tag (at Matchbox, this salad is \$7).

This is true in general for Matchbox. The value is great. Where else can you get a perfectly prepared, thick filet mignon served with dense mashed potatoes with a hint of horseradish; grilled, crisp asparagus; and a Gorgonzola-cognac cream sauce so good that asking for more is tempting for \$25? The presentation is always tasteful, but never fancy: no raspberry-sauce drizzles or mashed potatoes in a champagne glass.

All that said, the chef and his crew never seem to get too serious. They provide quite a bit of

Matchbox co-owner Drew Kim carries a plate of miniburgers with a mountain of onion straws.



Photographs by Maya Alleruzzo/The Washington Times

Even after an expansion that tripled its space, the popular Matchbox restaurant in Chinatown often is packed, thanks to its fun atmosphere, good food and reasonable prices. The beer list is extensive. The pizza is baked in a wood-fired oven.

comic relief with the miniburger presentation. We ordered three burgers. They were delicious, juicy and flavorful, served on toasted brioche with a slice of pickle — and they arrived underneath a virtual mountain of onion straws.

Another nice appetizer choice is the shrimp tempura. Four large shrimp — coated with what seems more like a Chinese (this is in Chinatown) and fritterlike batter than the light Japanese tempura variety — rest on a large portion of mixed greens and mandarin orange sections. The fatty batter combines perfectly with the fresh greens and slightly tart oranges. It’s infused with a fittingly spicy honey-garlic sauce.

Then there is the handcrafted, wood-fired-oven pizza. According to the restaurant, the goal is to make the best pizza in Washington, a goal not quite reached. Though it certainly is delicious, with a thin, crispy crust and reasonable amounts of red sauce and mozzarella, we were more impressed with other dishes.

Guests can choose between small pizzas — enough for a small person — or large — adequate for a large person or to share. The spicy meatball pizza comes with crispy bacon, crushed red pepper and fresh garlic. It’s tasty, but it lingers for hours. More impressive, we found, was the pepper-crust yellowfin tuna with sesame sticky rice and stir-fried vegetables. The tuna was just right: a nice piece of fish prepared perfectly to order, medium rare.

Our waiter was pleasant and

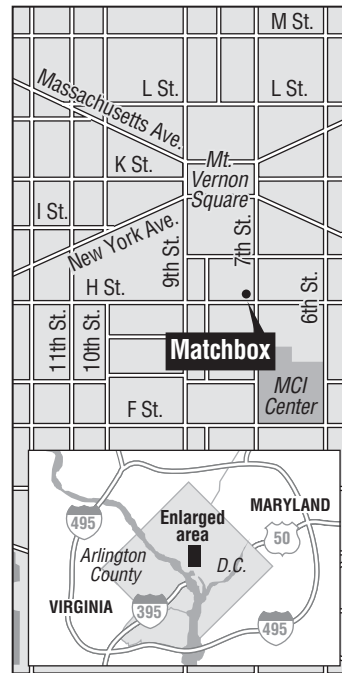
informative, but he seemed overwhelmed, with a bit of the deer-in-the-headlights look about him. After the expansion, the restaurant has 11 waiters instead of five. Maybe that’s not enough; 20 minutes is too long to wait for a beer.

The dessert menu is heavy on chocolate, with at least three types of chocolate cake. We chose the molten chocolate cake with vanilla ice cream. Yum. The bittersweet treat with its soft middle was perfect. Another sweet winner was the pear tart, also served with vanilla ice

cream. The thin and flaky, not-too-sweet pastry was covered with pear slices and had a slight hint of marzipan, creating a nice flavor and texture combination.

There is little not to like about Matchbox. The new floor plan — which involves two buildings and multiple floors — is a little confusing, and the staff is stretched a bit thin. That is easily forgiven because one comes away satisfied and happy, courtesy of Matchbox’s fun atmosphere, friendly waiters moderate prices and delicious food.

WHEN YOU GO



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RESTAURANT: Matchbox, 713 H St. NW; 202/289-4441; www.matchboxdc.com

HOURS: 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday through Thursday, until 11 p.m. Friday, and noon to 11 p.m. Saturday; bar usually open until about an hour after kitchen closes.

PRICES: Starters \$5 to \$14, main courses \$10 to \$25, desserts \$8.

CREDIT CARDS: All major cards
PARKING: Limited street parking and pay-parking garages

ACCESS: Wheelchair accessible
METRO: Gallery Place/Chinatown on Red Line