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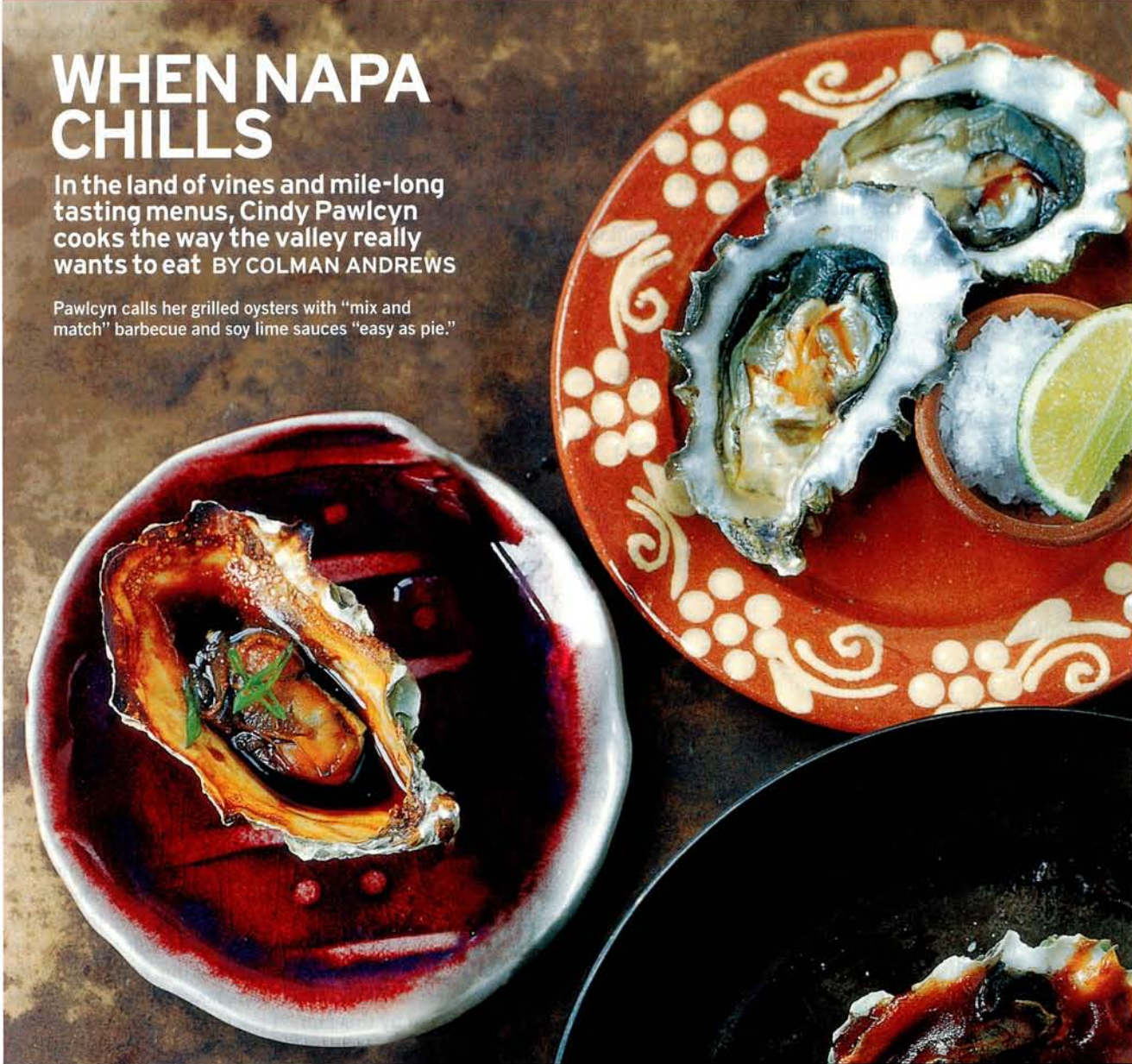
MENU

restaurants: reviews and trends

WHEN NAPA CHILLS

In the land of vines and mile-long tasting menus, Cindy Pawlcyn cooks the way the valley really wants to eat BY COLMAN ANDREWS

Pawlcyn calls her grilled oysters with "mix and match" barbecue and soy lime sauces "easy as pie."



I'm working my way through the tasting menu at my favorite Napa Valley restaurant. Sort of. Actually, my favorite Napa Valley restaurant doesn't have a tasting menu, because it's the kind of place where people come to actually eat and not just taste. But if it did, I'm absolutely confident that it would include exactly the kind of progression of dishes I have ordered on my own: an off-the-menu *amuse-bouche* of perfectly brittle homemade potato chips with a small crock of creamy blue cheese dressing; a first course of fried calamari on a heap of curried Asian-style slaw brightened with Fresno chiles; and a main course that is nothing less than one of the world's great cheeseburgers, plump (half a pound of beef) and juicy, reassuringly natural (it's from Niman Ranch), and full of flavor, draped with faintly pungent sharp white Grafton Cheddar >

and served on a fluffy but sturdy potato bun along with a generous heap of hand-cut fries—the kind that make people who earnestly announce “You know, McDonald’s really has good fries” seem pretty silly. (I don’t have much of a sweet tooth, so I haven’t ordered dessert, but if I did and had, then I imagine the worthiest successor to the foregoing fabulous excess would be that banana-chocolate-chunk bread pudding with vanilla ice cream and caramel sauce that people seem to faint over. Maybe one of these days ...)

You’ve probably figured out by now that I’m not at The French Laundry. Or at Auberge du Soleil, La Toque, Terra, Meadowood, or Domaine Chandon. I’m not anywhere fancy, anywhere pricey or French. I’m at Mustards Grill, a modest but bustling roadside restaurant on Highway 29 between Yountville and Oakville—and it occurs to me as I swipe a leftover fry through the meat juices on my plate where the burger used to be and take a sip of impeccable T-Vine Grenache, that, frankly, there aren’t a whole lot of other places I’d rather be right now.



AFTER TWO DECADES, PAWLCYN HAS BECOME PRETTY MUCH THE QUEEN OF NAPA VALLEY CASUAL DINING.

Back in the early 1970s, when I first visited the Napa Valley, you could have counted the good restaurants there on one hand and had five fingers left (unless you had a soft spot for the malt-shop burgers at Taylor’s Automatic Refresher, on Main Street in St. Helena). Unlike other great wine regions of the world, the valley didn’t have plates to match its bottles.

Things changed dramatically in 1973, when France’s venerable Moët et Chandon opened Domaine Chandon in Yountville to produce Champagne-method sparkling wines from local grapes. Domaine Chandon was not only the first California winery established by a major French producer (and, as such, the first money-where-their-mouth-is proof that the French took California’s potential as a winemaking region seriously); it also had quite possibly the world’s first serious winery restaurant attached—Étoile, under the direction of an accomplished French chef named Udo Nechutnys.

By the early 1980s, things had improved considerably in the Napa Valley. Nechutnys had left Chandon to open Miramonte, in a historic wood building in St. Helena (his replacement was another skilled French chef, Philippe Jeanty); Don and Sally Schmitt were serving straightforward but glorious American food, largely based on local ingredients (long before this became a cliché), at the original French Laundry in Yountville; The Diner, also in Yountville, was putting out the kind of diner food folks dream about; and at a new resort in St. Helena called Meadowood, a young Minneapolis-born chef named Cindy Pawlcyn was cooking credible French country fare.

A NATIVE OF SUBURBAN MINNEAPOLIS, Pawlcyn—today a compact, vaguely elfin-looking woman of 51, with sparkling eyes and a generous smile framed by a shag of whitish hair—grew up in a food-conscious household. Her father owned potato farms and a potato chip factory. “He also raised chickens and ducks in the backyard,” Pawlcyn recalls. “We had a chimney fireplace in the family room, where he’d cook ribs and things, and he used to make us doughnuts on snow days. My mom baked almost every loaf of bread she ever served us. It was a great way to grow up.”

While she was still in high school, Pawlcyn enrolled in a Minneapolis cooking school called La Cuvette, where she soon found herself assisting such illustrious guest instructors as Julia Child, Jacques Pépin, and Simone Beck. She went on to earn a degree in restaurant and hotel administration, then headed for Chicago, where she apprenticed briefly at the estimable Le Perroquet, under the Spanish chef Gabino Sotelino, then became his sous-chef when he took over the famous old Pump Room at the Ambassador Hotel for Rich Melman’s Lettuce Entertain You restaurant group.

When two of Melman’s star restaurant managers, Bill Higgins and Bill Upson, left to open a place called MacArthur Park in San Francisco, they brought Pawlcyn along. Once that was up and running, she decided to take the chef’s job at Meadowood. “Napa was very different in those days,” she says. “There were still walnut and prune orchards, and there was a shop on Main Street in St. Helena where you could buy wine-making supplies. And there weren’t many good places to eat.” One that was good was Rose et LeFavour, where Bruce LeFavour, an American with classical French training, served nightly prix-fixe dinners of up to nine courses in elegant surroundings. Pawlcyn did a brief tour there after three years at Meadowood. Then, in 1983, she reunited with Higgins and Upson to open Mustards Grill.

“I wanted to make Mustards a locals’ joint,” Pawlcyn says, “a place with a really good burger where you could come in your winery boots or you could come dressed up for a special occasion—a place you could come to after whatever had happened to you that day.”

Higgins, Upson, and Pawlcyn went on to launch a number of other restaurants in Northern California, including such enduring classics as Fog City Diner and Bix in San Francisco, and Tra Vigne in St. Helena. Their enterprise expanded to Aspen, Las Vegas, Texas, Tennessee, and even Japan. Eventually, the company got too big for Pawlcyn; she felt too removed from the part she liked the best, the cooking, and in 2000, she sold her interest to her partners. “Somehow,” she says, still seeming a bit amazed by this fact, “I got to keep Mustards.”

Today, the Napa Valley is full of good restaurants, both upscale and otherwise (see “Napa Casual,” page 36), and Pawlcyn owns three of them: Mustards, Cindy’s Backstreet Kitchen (which she describes as “sort of a downtown Mustards”—the downtown being the little burg of St. Helena), and a new seafood restaurant called Go Fish. Though I think it’s safe to say that it would never occur to her to call herself this, Pawlcyn has become pretty much the queen of Napa Valley casual dining.

Almost as soon as she was on her own, Pawlcyn bought the old Miramonte, and, with the help of chef Pablo Jacinto—a Oaxaca native whose brother, Erasto, has long been the chef at Mustards—turned it into an enterprising and unusual showcase for the cooking of Mexico and Central and South America. Nice try, but it didn’t work, and she closed the place after

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less than a year. "One problem," says Pawlcyn, "was that a lot of the wine people thought the food was too strongly flavored for their wines. That was a lesson to me."

With Pablo's help, she converted the restaurant almost overnight into a place she dubbed Cindy's Backstreet Kitchen, a name suggesting home cooking and accessibility and nothing the least bit threatening to thin-skinned vintners. The look of Cindy's plays along with the homey theme: It has a cheery tearoom simplicity about it, with a curio shelf, half-curtained windows, and black-on-white fruit-themed wallpaper. The food, however, is every bit as vivid and forthright as anything at Mustards. In fact, Pawlcyn admits in her book *Big Small Plates*, written with the Jacinto brothers, "We kept the Latin dishes that we loved and couldn't part with, but gave most of them new Anglo names." The moist, garlic-scented Panamanian meatloaf, for instance, became "mighty meatloaf," with horseradish barbecue sauce and garlic mashed potatoes.

One of the restaurant's most popular dishes, the rabbit tostada—an offering so emblematic of Pawlcyn's approach to food that she put it on the cover of *Big Small Plates*—is similarly authoritative: It's a big, multitextured, salad-y thing involving strips of sautéed Sonoma rabbit tossed in red chile paste, cumin-flavored black beans, red chile salsa, leaves of arugula and cilantro, shreds of raw cabbage, and a crumbling of feta on top. The Backstreet Fry, meanwhile, elevates fried squid, jumbling it up with okra, *pasilla* chiles, and red-onion rings—all in a light, crisp batter—and garnishing the assortment with jalapeño-cilantro aioli. There's an excellent burger here, too, but the star sandwich is a burger of a different sort: a gingery patty of ground duck, glazed with a sweet-and-sour-and-salty marinade and served with homemade shiitake mushroom ketchup

and Chinese-style mustard on a sesame brioche roll—a sort of raucous Americanization of dim sum. Even winemakers love it.

LAST SEPTEMBER, Pawlcyn opened Go Fish, on the site of Joachim Splichal's restaurant Pinot Blanc. "I'd always wanted to have a fish house," Pawlcyn says. It's no clam shack, though: It's a big-city-looking place, bright and sleek, mostly blue-and-white and hard-edged, with a boomerang-shaped sushi bar connecting to the regular bar. The sushi is the preserve of Ken Tominaga, proprietor of Hana in Rohnert Park, near Santa Rosa, which is where all the Napa Valley chefs go for their *toro* and *unagi*. The main kitchen is under the direction of Victor Scargle, who had been chef at Julia's Kitchen at COPIA: The American Center for Wine, Food, and the Arts, in Napa, since 2003.

Go Fish is a work in progress. "I want the food to be simple, clean, and robust," says Pawlcyn—terms that describe most of the dishes at Mustards and Cindy's Backstreet, but that aren't yet universally applicable here. Tominaga gets terrific fish and patently knows how to handle it, but, well, he's a California sushi chef, with all the multi-ingredient, cutely named preparations ("hard rock'n roll") that implies. Sometimes these can be engaging, like an over-the-top lobster roll special with avocado, shrimp tempura, *tobiko*, chives, *yuzu* dressing, and spicy mayonnaise, with segments of the roll served in the form of the lobster's body, with its head and tail attached. Good, yes. But simple and clean?

Scargle likes to complicate things, too. His clam chowder is a thick puréed soup with bits of clam and potato added in. Sautéed *rougets*, served as an appetizer, are delicious—sweet and perfectly cooked—but

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NAPA CASUAL

Here are six good casual restaurants in the Napa Valley that Cindy Pawlcyn doesn't own.

Ad Hoc (6476 Washington Street, Yountville; 707-944-2487) Thomas Keller (The French Laundry) has converted the building that used to house the much lamented Diner into a restaurant dedicated to, as its motto says, "temporary relief for hunger." The point originally was that Ad Hoc would exist only until Keller opened his long-promised burger joint on the site, but in January he announced that the restaurant would continue operating indefinitely. Lucky us. The place is full of easy charm and the food (there's one \$45 four-course dinner a night, served family style) is simple, American—think heirloom tomato salad, braised short ribs, dazzling fried chicken, blueberry cobbler—and very well cooked.

Bistro Don Giovanni (4110 Howard Lane, Napa; 707-224-3300; *bistrodon giovanni.com*) More trattoria than bistro, this California-flavored Italian place is a

great favorite with locals, who love the "asparagus saltimbocca" (fried asparagus with aioli), the pizzas (including a classic Margherita) and pastas (like textbook spaghetti with clams), and the pan-roasted chicken. There's also a terrific cheeseburger with onion rings.

Bistro Jeanty (6510 Washington Street, Yountville; 707-944-0103; *bistrojeanty.com*) Philippe Jeanty, the second chef at Domaine Chandon's posh Étoile, cooks first-rate bistro food at this warm little place. Subtle, velvety tomato soup beneath a pastry dome is a specialty, as is the lamb's tongue and potato salad, various pâtés, and the opulent beef daube.

Bouchon (6534 Washington Street, Yountville; 707-944-8037; *frenchlaundry.com*) Thomas Keller obviously understands simple food as well as the more complex variety. Thus, this stylish brasserie, with its enticing menu, offers impeccable oysters and other raw seafood, exquisite rillettes of fresh and smoked salmon,

classic onion soup, boudin blanc (white sausage) with potato purée, and steak frites. Open late (until 12:30 A.M. if there are customers).

Cook St. Helena (1310 Main Street, St. Helena; 707-963-7088) An agreeable, unpretentious, more-or-less-Italian storefront in the middle of town that does a good job with standards like fried calamari (served with aioli), minestrone, and eggplant parmigiana. The braised lamb shank and braised short ribs are both superb. Among the pastas, the gnocchi with Gorgonzola is particularly good.

Taylor's Automatic Refresher (933 Main Street, St. Helena; 707-963-3486; *taylor'srefresher.com*) A 1949-vintage drive-in/malt shop original, picnic tables and all, updated by winemaker Joel Gott and his brother Duncan. Burgers, hot dogs, grilled cheese, sodas and shakes—but also an ahi burger, fish tacos, an addictive Chinese chicken salad, and ... wine (remember where you are). —C.A.

SPECIAL EQUIPMENT: 2 (9-inch) round cake pans (2 inches deep)

MAKE CAKE: Put oven rack in middle position and preheat oven to 350°F. Butter and flour cake pans, knocking out excess flour.

► Sift together cake flour, baking powder, baking soda, salt, and spices into a large bowl.

► Beat together butter (1½ sticks) and brown sugar in another bowl with an electric mixer (fitted with paddle attachment if using a stand mixer) at medium-high speed until pale and fluffy, 3 to 5 minutes. Beat in eggs 1 at a time, beating well after each addition, then beat in vanilla. Reduce speed to low, then add flour mixture and sour cream alternately in batches, beginning and ending with flour mixture and mixing until batter is just smooth. Mix in pecans until just combined.

► Spoon batter evenly into pans, smoothing tops, then rap pans once or twice to expel any air bubbles. Bake until pale golden and a wooden pick inserted in center of cakes comes out clean, 30 to 35 minutes. Cool 10 minutes in pans on racks. Run a thin knife around edge of pans, then invert racks over pans and reinvert cakes onto racks to cool completely.

MAKE FROSTING: Beat together cream cheese, butter, and zest in a bowl with clean beaters at medium-high speed until fluffy, 1 to 2 minutes. Sift in confectioners sugar and stir with a wooden spoon until just combined, then add lemon juice and beat at medium-high speed until frosting is smooth.

ASSEMBLE AND FROST CAKE: Halve each cake layer horizontally with a long serrated knife using a gentle sawing motion. Put 1 layer, cut side up, on a cake stand or large plate and spread with about ¾ cup frosting. Stack remaining cake layers, spreading about ¾ cup frosting on each layer and ending with top cake layer cut side down. Spread top and side of cake with remaining frosting (about 3½ cups) and coat side of cake with pecans (1½ cups), gently pressing to help them adhere.

COOKS' NOTES: Cake layers (not split) can be kept, wrapped individually in plastic wrap and placed in large sealed plastic bags, chilled 1 day or frozen 1 week. If frozen, thaw in bags at room temperature, about 2 hours.

• Frosting can be made 1 day ahead and chilled, covered. Bring to room temperature, then stir until smooth before using.

• Cake can be assembled and frosted 8 hours ahead, then kept, loosely covered with plastic wrap, at room temperature.

PINEAPPLE IN GINGER RUM SYRUP

SERVES 10

ACTIVE TIME: 25 MIN START TO FINISH: 1¼ HR
(INCLUDES COOLING)

Juicy pineapple with a nip of rum and ginger is a sophisticated compote that complements bites of the pecan spice cake (recipe precedes) but also makes a satisfying light dessert on its own.

5 cups water

1 cup sugar

16 (⅛-inch-thick) rounds fresh ginger

2 pineapples (about 3 lb each),
peeled, quartered lengthwise, and
cored, then cut crosswise into
¼-inch slices

⅓ cup dark rum

► Bring water, sugar, and ginger to a boil in a wide 6-quart heavy pot, stirring until sugar is dissolved, then boil, uncovered, 3 minutes. Remove from heat and let syrup steep, covered, 10 minutes.

► Remove ginger with a slotted spoon and discard. Add pineapple to syrup and simmer, covered, stirring occasionally, until pineapple is translucent, 6 to 8 minutes.

► Transfer pineapple with slotted spoon to a heatproof bowl, then boil syrup, uncovered, until reduced to 2 cups, 10 to 15 minutes. Add rum to syrup and gently boil 1 minute, then pour over pineapple. Cool to room temperature, about 45 minutes. Serve at room temperature or chilled.

COOKS' NOTE: Pineapple in syrup can be made 1 day ahead and chilled, covered.🍷

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WHEN NAPA CHILLS

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they don't need their apple balsamic dressing. An ambitious "surf and turf" combining ahi tuna and sweetbreads in ruby Port sauce with wild mushrooms and leek *Rösti* is heavy-handed and dissonant. On the other hand, simple salt-crusted Gulf prawns with sweet-and-sour dipping sauce are a delight, as are a side dish of sweet butter-drenched Brussels sprouts leaves with bits of red onion and an interpretation of bouillabaisse that's

actually a dense, intensely flavorful seafood soup with pieces of fish and shellfish protruding from it. An assortment of fresh fish is offered daily, sautéed, grilled, or poached, with a choice of six condiments (from tartar sauce to olive-and-*piquillo* tapenade). These are just what they should be, and hard to fault—but out of a half-dozen fish choices one evening, only one (swordfish) was local.

Given Pawlcyn's track record, I'm confident that she'll get it right at Go Fish—that she'll end up with the fish house she wants. Meanwhile, there's Cindy's Backstreet Kitchen not far away. And, of course, Mustards is just down the road.

I'm back there now, as a matter of fact, having dinner with a couple of friends. We started with Vietnamese lettuce wraps (tender, crisp-edged grilled pork loin pieces flavored with lemongrass, served in lettuce cups with mint and fish sauce), an extraordinary if not quite traditional Caesar salad with rough-edged croutons and plenty of Parmigiano-Reggiano, and some superb sweet corn tamales with wild mushrooms, tomatillo-avocado salsa, and pumpkin seeds. Now we're devouring the barbecued baby back ribs, which Pawlcyn says are inspired by the ribs her father used to make in their suburban fireplace (these have been smoked for two hours—all three of Pawlcyn's restaurants have wood grills—then braised in homemade barbecue sauce, and are quite possibly the best ribs I've ever had in a nonbarbecue place); a thick, juicy pork chop glazed with a sauce that includes hoisin, soy sauce, sesame oil, and both Sherry and rice vinegar; and a very convincing tea-smoked duck, with wonderful flavor, reminiscent of country ham. Why we're not also having the onion rings with homemade tomato-apple ketchup, the chipotle-rubbed quail, the Niman Ranch calf's liver with applewood-smoked bacon, the butternut squash and sage ravioli, and the barbecued pork sandwich, I can't quite remember. As a legend on the menu says, "Sorry, everything is delicious."

CINDY'S BACKSTREET KITCHEN

1327 Railroad Avenue, St. Helena
(707-963-1200)

GO FISH

641 Main Street, St. Helena
(707-963-0700)

MUSTARDS GRILL

7399 St. Helena Highway, Yountville
(707-944-2424)🍷