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Entertainment

Good bar food — Alembic's the place



(Jason Steinberg/Special to The Examiner)

Executive Chef Eddie Blyden calls Alembic a "gastro pub," meaning it's a casual place serving high-quality fare.

The French fries are a menu favorite.

Patricia Unterman, The Examiner
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SAN FRANCISCO - A good bar is a rare and beautiful thing and David McLean, the owner of Alembic, a new bar on Haight, has made all right decisions.

A veritable library of artisan spirits, many local and distilled in small batches, are catalogued on blackboards suspended on pulleys above the bar. Composed cocktails (\$9), like a well proportioned negroni, satisfy traditionalists, while new-school concoctions, effusively described on their own menu, cater to whomever. The selection of beer, ales, sake and wines gets no less attention.

Glassware and presentation, so central to the ritual of drinking, contribute tactile pleasure. The bartenders, in retro print shirts, calmly plying the floorboards behind the wide, wooden bar, do five things at once but always have time to answer a question or offer advice.

The crew at Alembic (which has been open only a couple of months) has not only mastered the back stories of the booze, but enjoys telling them. They have tasted.

They have opinions. They are enthusiastic and intelligent.

But it's the food that gets me high. Eddie Blyden, the Jamaican-born chef who revamped the menu at sister restaurant Magnolia Pub and Brewery down the street, has created an eclectic menu of nibbles and larger dishes meant to be shared. Their common thread is tastiness.

Almost everyone happily munches on a bowl of skinny, crisp French fries tossed in herbs and fresh lemongrass, with a sweet, mustardy dipping sauce (\$5). I start with a big deviled duck egg (\$1 each) with creamy, mustard-inflected yolk spooned into the middle.

Light, lemony goat cheese fritters (\$9), dusted in breadcrumbs, dissolve on your tongue leaving little bits of zest. The fritters come with a charming salad of endive, shaved watermelon radish, apple and walnuts.

In the Haight, vegetarians have their day. Many hot dishes at Alembic are meatless and delicious, like haunting grilled turmeric and ginger mushrooms (\$10), kept warm in a miniature cast iron cocotte. Roasted cipollini onions and Brussels sprouts tossed with hazelnuts in brown butter (\$8) is as classic a dish as it is tasty.

My favorite dish on the menu, sliders (\$10), marries Morocco and California in the most compatible way. Juicy lamb burgers, aromatic with spices, come on toasted country bread slathered with chili-infused aioli, roasted red peppers and chopped black olives. I can attest that fruity red wine goes well with them.

Beer and Scotch drinkers like Lancaster county "cheesesteak," shredded oxtails atop gravy-soaked toast, topped with creamy, mild cheddar sauce (\$18). Also fun is Blyden's spaetzle (\$13), tender/chewy house-made dumplings tossed with bits of rabbit, bacon, mushrooms and gruyere — pure comfort food enlivened

with tarragon and mustard.

If you have room for dessert, the blood orange parfait (\$7), a thick slab of creamy blood orange ice cream drizzled with caramelly blood orange syrup, is bright in flavor and refreshing.

Alembic's popularity may be its biggest problem. The place is small, mostly taken up by a bar made from an old Kezar Stadium bench (you can still see the seat numbers etched into the wood), with a few tiny tables in the back and two high round tables in the front. If you don't hit it right, the wait can be long. People tend to linger. One rye leads to another. The minute you walk in, you know that this is one of those bars where spirits always run high.

ALEMBIC

Location: 1725 Haight St., San Francisco

Contact: (415) 666-0822, alembicbar.com

Hours: Dinner nightly from 5 p.m. to midnight; lunch Saturday and Sunday from noon to 4 p.m.; bar serves until 2 a.m. nightly

Price range: \$4 to \$10 for nibbles; \$6 to \$16 for larger dishes

Recommended dishes: Sliders, deviled duck eggs, turmeric mushrooms, goat cheese fritters, fried chicken quesadillas, orange parfait

Credit cards: All major

Reservations: Not accepted

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