

TASTE BUDS | 21st Amendment

Chef Blyden steps up to the plate

This SoMa brew pub hits a grand slam

BY PATRICIA UNTERMAN
Special to The Examiner

Brew pubs are not my cup of tea. I don't like big, chewy, house-made ales, and the food at these beer-centric joints usually gets short shrift. But 21st Amendment, a noisy, happening, 2-year-old brew pub up the street from Pac Bell Park, is an exception: The food is terrific! (The 21st Amendment to the Constitution repealed Prohibition.)

The menu, conceived by the talented Eddie Blyden, a chef with roots in the Caribbean and cooking experience in Europe, is casual, reasonably priced and just what you'd expect to see in a SoMa warehouse/brewery. However the seasonality, simplicity and execution of the dishes set it apart.

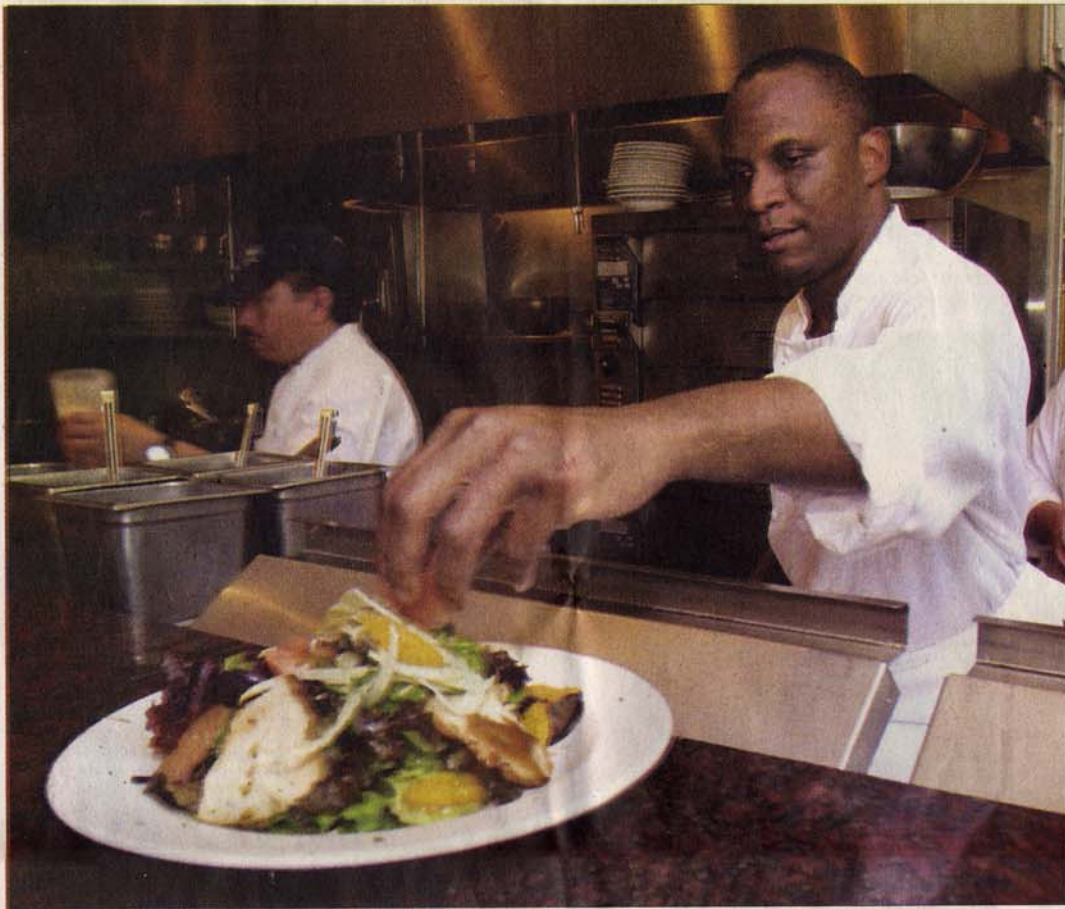
Love at first bite

The first thing I tasted here, a pile of deliciously charred Monterey Bay squid in a toasted coriander-seed vinaigrette (\$5.25), made me take notice. The grilling was perfect. The squid stayed tender and moist, yet was caramelized where the fire licked the skin.

Though whole coriander seeds released their subtle fragrance in a warm vinaigrette splashed over the squid, the squid had to be pristinely fresh for this basically naked preparation to work. It did.

Each bite was a pleasure, one that I wanted to prolong by mopping up the juices at the bottom of the plate. But the one quirk of 21st Amendment is that it doesn't serve bread. (I guess most people get enough yeast and grain in the ales — wouldn't want to fill up on bread when there's beer to be drunk!)

I've had about a thousand beet salads, but the one here (\$7.50) ranks among the best. The organic red and gold beets were sweet; dabs of goat cheese contributed tang; arugula in a sharp, lively vinaigrette supplied nuttiness; and a drizzle of bal-



KAREN VIBERT-KENNEDY/THE EXAMINER

It's a hit: At 21st Amendment, chef Eddie Blyden scores big with a menu of great food that isn't overshadowed by the brew.

samic reduction completed the dance of sweet and sour.

A Niman pork chop (\$15.95), again grilled expertly so the fat just blackened around the edges, was seasoned with a spice rub but not overpowered by it, so you could appreciate the juiciness and natural flavor of this beautiful meat.

Glazed plantains, green and yellow beans, and a peppery, clear jus (which showed its pedigree of classic meat stock) made this a dish to remember. The jerked pork chop has become a signature dish, and every table seemed to have one.

For chicken lovers, chef Blyden offers a roasted, crisp-skinned half bird on a pile of buttery mashed potatoes, showered with fresh favas and a chiffonade of Smithfield ham (\$11.95). This salty, dry ham also flavored the natural gravy on this dish, giving it an American Southern accent.

Not only does 21st Amendment make beer, it makes its own fragrant root beer and ginger ale that become the foundation for distinctive ice-cream floats for dessert. But you may not want to pass up a warm, fresh fruit crisp served in its own little deep dish

with a gratinéed top.

Loud setting

The food was so engaging, I quickly forgot about the roar that hit me over the head the minute I walked into this converted warehouse.

Noise bounces off the cement floor, emanates from the sheet metal of the open kitchen, and hovers around the large U-shaped bar with televisions tuned to sports events.

At first, everyone seems to be yelling — and they probably are — in order to be heard. The handsome wood structure of the

restaurant, the wooden tables, banquettes and chairs may add visual softness, but don't dampen any sound.

Neither do paper napkins or the paper coaster for your beer. This is a brew pub after all, a bare-bones place, that's meant to be loud.

The waiters patiently answer questions about beer and food and seek out answers to those they can't. After dinner, I asked the waitress who was responsible for this great meal; she brought Blyden over.

He wasn't surprised by the praise I heaped on the food. He

Review

21st Amendment

563 Second St. (between Brannan and Bryant streets), San Francisco, (415) 369-0900. Open 11:30 a.m. to 9 p.m. Sunday-Wednesday, 11:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. Thursday-Saturday; bar menu served till closing. Open 11 a.m. on Giants game days.

Would I go back? For grilled squid in toasted coriander-seed vinaigrette and the spice-rubbed Niman pork chop, any time.

told me that he considered long and hard whether to take the job at 21st Amendment because he wasn't sure about wanting to cook food to go with beer. Thank goodness he relented.

But was this initial experience at 21st Amendment just luck?

Another sampling

I returned a few nights later, fearful I shouldn't have worried. Three of us ate a small, pillowy but thin-crust pepperoni pizza made with the brew pub's special beer-mash dough (\$8.75). An arugula, pear and walnut salad (\$6.75) sparkled in a sharp but balanced vinaigrette.

Grilled fresh shrimp on a bed of spicy curried couscous studded with minced peppers and grapefruit and drizzled with a little cream (\$12.50) turned out to be a delicious melange that somehow reminded me of the Caribbean.

A surprisingly tender lesser cut of Niman steak came with a heap of crispy sweet-potato straws (\$13.95) — a lot of tasty meat for the price of a pasta. And the classic burger (\$8.75) with grilled onions and cheese on a soft bun melded together the way a good burger should, so you feel as if you're getting a complete meal in a single sandwich.

No doubt about it, the cooking standards at 21st Amendment do not change from day to day. Every dish is made with conviction and every ingredient in each dish has a reason for being there.

Such clear-headed, honest food is rare. Eddie Blyden knows exactly what he's doing, and we, the grateful eating public, are the beneficiaries — even if we don't drink beer.