

The diner with a Hollywood secret

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The menu choices are staggering. So are the meal portions. But if you are vegan, a vegetarian or gluten-intolerant, Brian's 24 isn't the easiest place to eat.

Since the recent closure of Du-Par's Restaurant & Bakery (see this month's Food and Drink Blotter), the family-owned diner reigns as the only 24/7 kitchen in the Gaslamp Quarter where you can score eggs Benedict and monstrous pancakes for dinner, or soup and a meatloaf sandwich at sunrise — or visa versa if your appetite runs on Industrial Revolution meal cues.

Think of any dish that's ever slid off a diner grill — assorted omelets, country fried steak, a tuna melt or Monte Cristo sandwich, for example — and you'll find it at Brian's, which originated as Brian's Drinkery & Eatery under different owners until the Epstein family purchased it in 2008.

There are also flame-grilled beef burgers of several sorts (all half-pounders), including one crowned with peanut butter, bacon and American cheese.

My vegetarian companion took solace in a standard-size Gardenburger with mushrooms and Swiss cheese from a litany of options centered mostly on animal proteins: carne asada fries, fish and chips, roasted pork loin, a four-piece chicken dinner in honey batter, and much more.



Veggie burger with Swiss cheese and mushrooms

Unbeknown to most customers is the origin of the dark wood bar and ornate liquor-stocked mantelpiece behind it. The imposing furnishings belonged to screen legend Joan

Crawford. They were acquired after her death in an estate sale by the adjoining St. James Hotel, which is now owned by Ramada.



The bar and mantle piece once belonged to Joan Crawford (*Photos by Frank Sabatini Jr.*)

If only that bar could talk. Rumor has it Crawford liked dancing on it after a few vodka stingers at her all-night house parties with Hollywood glitterati gathered around. True or not, the dimples scattered along the surface undoubtedly reveal that someone donning sturdy stilettos gave it a few foot poundings back then.

These days the bar shuts down by 2 a.m., after which Downtown club-goers with booze-induced appetites begin piling into the restaurant for sobering meals.

Or in some cases, according to our waiter, wackier ones, such as the customer who soaked his french fries in a milkshake before eating them, or another who requested waffles instead of bread for a meatloaf sandwich.

“You see it all after the bars close,” he said.



The “hearty hotcakes”

Visiting midday, we weren’t as madcap with our intake, although nearly everything we ordered was exceptionally filling enough to diminish our stagger had we been drinking. A triple stack of “hearty hotcakes” was speckled throughout with pecans, almonds, raisins and dried cranberries. Rich in buttermilk, yet light and springy, they could pass as pancakes straight out of a grandmother’s large, cast iron pan.



Roast pork hash with eggs

Roast pork hash was dominated by potatoes and served redundantly with home fries. The small cubes of pork were scant and flavorful only when isolated from the spuds. I requested the eggs over-medium. Oddly, one sported a solid yolk, and the other was quite runny.

Many items at Brian's are made in-house, such as the soups, country gravy, marinara sauce, and to my surprise, the pizza dough.



Pizza with onions and green chilies

Rarely do I find pizza even in pre-manufactured form available in all-American diners such as this, and it was my friend's ticket to yet another vegetarian dish since he doesn't eat eggs.

We were pleasantly surprised. Topped generously with buttery mozzarella, red onions, sautéed mushrooms and diced green chilies; it featured a crust resembling good Italian bread, which paired well to the thin layer of bright marinara beneath the ingredients.

We each took some home, and it turned all the better reheated in the oven. In addition to the regular meal offerings is a separate menu card of various tater tots sold by the pound, which Brian's introduced last year during Comic-Con under the promotion "Tot-a-Palooza."

Their toppings are geared for the biggest of appetites, ranging from chopped burger patties and Buffalo-style chicken with blue cheese, to Canadian bacon with hollandaise sauce or diced steak with sour cream.

Maybe we'll try it next time after imbibing with a few friends from one of the restaurant's 52-ounce fishbowl cocktails.

We passed also on the restaurant's most popular dessert, a chewy pecan blondie created by Ida Epstein, the matriarch of the family. The choices extend to colossal shakes, hot fudge sundaes and root beer floats.

Brian's 24

828 Sixth Ave.
(Gaslamp Quarter)

619-702-8410

brians24.com

Breakfast plates, \$9.49 to
\$20.99,

Appetizers and salads,
\$5.49 to \$14.49,

Burgers and sandwiches,
\$12.99 to \$15.99,

Pizzas, \$10.99 to \$14.99,

Entrees, \$11.49 to \$21.99

The food portions notch down a bit during happy hour (4 to 7 p.m., daily), when chicken quesadillas, fish tacos, and half-pound orders of potato skins and “pizza tots” sell for \$6. In addition, draft beer, some of them local crafts, are \$4, and wine by the glass is \$5.

—*Frank Sabatini Jr. is the author of “Secret San Diego” (ECW Press), and began his local writing career more than two decades ago as a staffer for the former San Diego Tribune. You can reach him at fsabatini@san.rr.com.*