



It's All in the Crust

Matchbox fires up a New York-style pizza

IT DOESN'T TAKE A CIA OPERATIVE to figure out how the owners of Matchbox came up with the name for their new restaurant in Chinatown.

One obvious clue is that each of the tables is inset with several matchboxes collected from restaurants around the world. Tip No. 1: The three skinny dining areas, stacked up in three stories, have the proportions of, well, matchboxes. Finally, the big brick oven on the ground floor, visible from the bar, burns a nonstop orange, fueled by a forest of hickory, oak, cherry and other woods.

All that heat is needed to turn soft circles of raw dough into crackling rounds of pizza, the restaurant's primary lure. Not just any pizza, the owners want you to know, but New York-style pizza, which is distinguished by a thin, crisp crust and a nice char from a blazing fire. It's a trick that the handlers here manage pretty well, fairly frequently.

A good thing, too, because the selections take up a full page of the menu. Matchbox can make the decision for you, with the likes of its "Q Special," scattered with herbed chicken, toasted peppers and mushrooms, or let you build your own pizza, from a list of nearly two dozen toppings. Here comes a bias: I'm a purist when it comes to some of life's pleasures. I never put sauce on raw oysters, and I take my martinis with gin and vermouth, end of discussion. On the matter of pizza, particularly a pizza that aspires to classic status, I don't want a lot of toppings to distract me from the crust. So the pies I gravitate to are simply decorated. Some brush strokes of a zippy tomato sauce, a light application of cheese and maybe some anchovies, onions or herbs are what most appeal to me. If I have to choose from the arranged marriages here, though, my pick is the vegetarian pizza, slathered with a truly zesty tomato sauce, mozzarella and sautéed mushrooms, onions, and red peppers. Everything is in perfect balance. "Fire & Smoke," on the other hand, just reinforces my more-is-less theory: The brassy flavors of smoked gouda and a chipotle spiked sauce completely overwhelm the crust.

To help knock back a pie, there are a dozen

Matchbox

713 H St. NW (near Seventh Street). 202-289-4411

Open: for lunch and dinner Monday through Thursday 11:30a.m. to 10 p.m. Friday and Saturday 11:30 a.m. to 11 p.m. for pizza only Monday through Saturday until midnight. Closed Sunday. AE, MC, V. Reservations accepted for parties of six or more. Separate smoking area. Limited wheelchair access. Metro: Gallery Place-Chinatown.

Prices: appetizers \$5 to \$12, entrees \$8 to \$21. Full dinner with wine or beer, tax and tip about \$40 per person.



Matchbox's vegetarian pizza, with crisp crust and zesty tomato sauce.

Zero to Eighty



Everyone wants to hold onto this seat.

Hardwood Artisans
FURNITURE CRAFTSMEN SINCE 1976

Alpharetta 770.271.7254 • Kennesaw 770.425.3377
Chamblee 770.288.7263 • Woodstock 770.264.3144
www.hardwoodartisans.com

Swim Smarter!

Affordable custom pools with beauty—and brains

Our exclusive, state-of-the-art SmartFeatures will automate care, enhance comfort and safety, conserve water and energy, and purify water with virtually no chlorine!



TOP% FINANCING RATE

17' x 35' pool as low as \$18,995!

Base price includes plans & permit, site excavation, steel, plumbing, gunite, tile, coping, filter, pump and motor, skimmer, plaster steps, cleanup, and start up.*

BLUE HAVEN POOLS World's Largest!

Free 44-page color brochure, estimate & custom pool plan

—offices open 7 days a week—
MD 800.787.5400
VA 800.428.3696
www.bluehaven.com

1814C 39524 • VA 20138A

*Deck, electric, not included. Subject to zoning, codes, and access, etc. See local code book for details. For more information, call 1-800-428-3696. ©2003 Blue Haven Pools, Inc.

draft beers, running from the plebeian (Budweiser) to the polished (Chimay from Belgium), and a wine list that nicely suits this uncomplicated cooking. Kudos to Matchbox for pouring respectable labels and keeping the markups modest.

Burger enthusiasts should also plan a research trip to Matchbox, which features bite-size versions—take your pick from three, six or nine, priced at \$6, \$9 or \$12—among its short list of appetizers. Seasoned with crushed red pepper for some bite, the scaled-down hamburgers are also plump and juicy, slipped inside toasted brioche. Are the scrumptious onion strings, heaped in the center of the plate, trying to upstage the main event? They certainly appear to be. Light and lacy, dusted with parsley, oregano and Romano cheese, they do a Houdini, and vanish, as soon as you've tasted one.

Burgers to launch a meal? Why not? They are better bets than the fried calamari teamed with frisée lettuce, red peppers and way too much balsamic vinegar, or the steamed mussels, smothered in a thick white wine sauce and paired with a clump of dill-flecked shaved fennel. Spinach salad is overdressed, with so much bacon and chopped egg that the greens get lost—and dinner ends up tasting more like breakfast. A lighter option brings together peppery arugula, slivers of pear and walnuts, everything bound with a tangy apricot dressing. Nice.

Chef Graig Gluffling broadens Matchbox's appeal with half a dozen entrees that wouldn't look out of place on white table-

cloths. (Gluffling previously worked at Poste and Vidalia.) The best of these is a crisp slab of rockfish perched on a tasty hash of juicy rock shrimp, potatoes and pancetta. It is straightforward and satisfying, modern but not too chichi.

Almost everything else runs a distant second. Pork medallions are woefully over cooked; frankly, the homey cream sauce is the most memorable component on the plate, which also includes some crisp polenta and droopy broccoli rabe. "Spicy pecan-crusted chicken breast" could pass for a caramel roll, it's so sweet and compact. Thank goodness the dish also shows up with some skinny green beans and mashed potatoes, which get a welcome boost from an old-fashioned gravy. The pasta, meanwhile, is heavy-handed stuff, rigatoni combined with mushrooms, Parmesan cheese, mushrooms and a robust sun-dried tomato cream sauce. Dense and rib-sticking, it is not the sort of food most of us seek out in a Washington summer. And grilled salmon is best for its green lentils, though \$17 is a hefty price to pay for a handful of beans.

The area around Matchbox, in the shadow of MCI Center, is a sea of familiar brand names, most of which do little to raise local dining standards (and some of which, like Hooters, probably raise eye brows). So even with its flaws, I welcome this pizzeria. It's got spunk. It's got personality. The service is genial, the tunes are fun, and a double-header—good pizza and good burgers—is a great way to slide into summer.