Big Love

Euclid Hall
1317 14th Street
303-654-4205
www.euclidhall.com

Hours: 11:30 a.m. to 3 a.m. Monday-Thursday; 12 p.m. to 3 a.m. Friday-Saturday, 11:30 a.m. to 3 a.m. Sunday. Kitchen closes one hour before close each night.

I am a simple woman. My heart is won by various forms of carbohydrates, meat and fat, combined in excess and presented in one glorious dish. So it took just one look at the folded paper menu on my table at Euclid Hall to stir my interest.

The restaurant, which opened in early August, is the third eatery within a block for partners Beth Gruich and Jennifer Jasinski, a trio with impressive histories in the industry. Gruich managed the front of the house at spots in Chicago and Las Vegas before returning to Denver and a job at Panzano, where she met Jasinski, who became executive chef at the restaurant after a stint with Wolfgang Puck's group of eateries. The two left Panzano in 2001 and opened RJ in Larimer Square, then took over the nearby Bistro Vendome a few years later.

While RJia was a place I'd often take out-of-town guests with varying interest levels in food — ubiquitous big-city foods would find nothing to complain about, picky eaters would find something they liked — it was a particular favorite of mine. While Jasinski's mentorship has undeniable proven, I'd noticed that veterans of Puck's kitchen often share a common trait: They're excellent cooks with mastery of technique, but they're not inventive chefs. At RJia, it sometimes seemed that Jasinski was still perfecting someone else's dishes.

Not so at Euclid Hall.

Gruich and Jasinski started with a clear vision: An American tavern, a no-nonsense place where diners could gather for beers and bar food, elevated above bar level by making everything possible — sausages, mustard, pickles — in-house. With that articulate frame, they coddled themselves in every way imaginable, starting with the space itself. The building that houses Euclid Hall is part of Denver's history, a structure that has been home to an early doctor, the Masons, a brothel and a flea market. In the 1990s, it was the site of a standoff between then-governor Davis H. Waite and an underworld militia led by Soapy Smith (Smith and the corrupt police force prevailed); in the 1970s, Smith's name was again tied to the structure for Soapy Smith's Double Eagle Bar, a drinking hall that held the line for years. Most recently the address was home of Martini Ranch, a dark club where you could walk the runway and be aRegularly served by bittersweet vodka — and a place you'd never want to see in daylight for fear of the time you're running.

After Gruich and Jasinski took over the building, they revived its original name and restored it beautifully, scrubbing clean the brick walls and wooden floors and punching out the old Martini Ranch dance floor so that patios seated on the second floor can see down to the first. Seats line the counter and the bar on that floor; tables upstairs afford a more traditional dining experience, and booths provide intimacy for dates. For those looking for no-stress, a community table invites mingling over dinner by the downstairs bar; drinkers can also gather by the upstairs bar, snapping a selection off the vast and interesting beer list.

I first tripped up the stairs leading to that first floor after reading about a bone marrow-infused butter special that Euclid Hall had put on Facebook. The butter was as silky as buttercream, possibly the most indulgentthing I've ever spread on toast. It was such a natural, decadent combination that traditionally involves gravy, cheese and French fries. It's enough to make your arteries sing and your heart sing, but at least you'll die happy. Especially at Euclid Hall, where one potion includes tender chunks of roasted duck being in a poppy seed gravy made of duck fat. I had to salt the duck liberally — but my cholesterol levels aren't going up in my bloodstream just as well, too.

By the time I was through stuffing myself, I knew this was just the beginning of a precarious, I can't-quite-stop-you love affair. As with any crisp, Euclid Hall was always on my mind.

Three nights later, after picking someone up at the airport, I found myself not so subtly suggesting a late-night snack at the place — thanks, the kitchen stays open late. Sharing a housemade potato salad, we talked about how the bite of the bone-infused version contrasted with the subtle sweetness of the beet and horseradish. We followed that with a warm potato salad, with chunks of fingerling potatoes mixed in, lightly crisped and golden brown, drizzled with acetic sherry vinegar, combined with housemade spicy mustard and infused with a healthy dose of crispy bacon strips (and a few, baked-in bacon bits). The Camembert grilled cheese suffered another play of flavors, sweet and savory, with the peach preserves browning off the tang Camembert. We left feeling a little more fat and fuzzy, both from a couple of beers and a little Alex and the satisfaction that comes from heavy food that hits the spot.

A few nights later, I was back again. Our well-versed server patiently answered every question we asked, and soon our table was loaded with plates to share. We started with the rocket salad, crisp greens bathed in a crispy candied-fennel vinaigrette, made memorable by the slight edge of a chunk of Camembert cheese, continued on page 40