cafe

Big Love

Euclid Hall
1317 14th Street
303-595-4255
www.euclidhall.com
Hours: 11:30 a.m.-1 a.m. Monday-Thursday; 11:30 a.m.-2 a.m. Friday, 3 p.m.-2 a.m. Saturday, 11 a.m.-1 a.m. Sunday. Kitchen closes one hour before close each night.

BY LAURA SHUNK

I am a simple woman. My heart can be 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 Gruitch and Jennifer Jasinski, a pair with impressive histories in the industry. Gruitch 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 that restaurant after a long stint with Wolfgang Puck's group of eateries. The two left Panzano in 2004 to open Rioja in Larimer Square, then took over the nearby Bistro Vendôme a few years later.

While Rioja was a place I'd often take out-of-town guests with varying interest levels in food — unbearable big-city snobs would find nothing to complain about, picky eaters would find something they'd eat — it wasn't a particular favorite of mine. While Jasinski's mentor has undeniable prowess, 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 innovative chefs. At Rioja, it sometimes seemed that Jasinski was still perfecting someone else's dishes.

Not so at Euclid Hall.

Gruitch and Jasinski started with a clear vision: an American tavern, an unassuming place where diners could gather for beers and bar food, elevated well above bar level by making everything possible — sausages, mustards, pickles — in-house. With that articulate frame, they outdid 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 1890s, 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 lease for years. Most recently the address was the home of Martini Ranch, a dark club where you could work the sticky dance floor fueled by bottle-service vodka — and a place you'd never want to see in daylight for fear of the grime you'd encounter.

After Gruitch and Jasinski took over the building, they retrieved 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 patrons seated on the second floor can see down to the first. Seats line the chef's counter and the bar on that floor; tables upstairs afford a more traditional dining experience, and booths provide intimacy for dates. For those looking to socialize, a community table invites mingling over dinner by the downstairs bar; drinkers can also gather by the upstairs bar, sipping a selection off the vast and interesting beer list.

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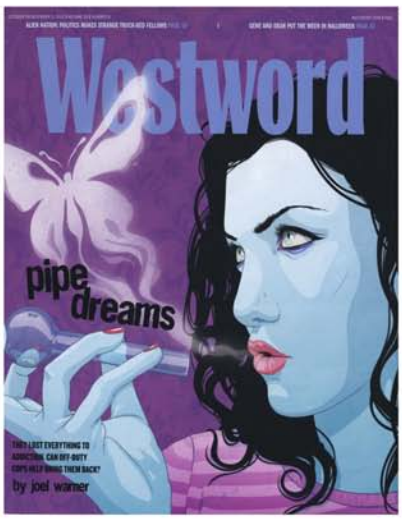
Sausage tasting	$15
Roasted duck poutine	$11
Duroc pork schnitzel	$12.50
Chicken and waffles	$12.50
Brat burger	$9.50
Camembert griddled cheese	$9.50
Brulèed bone marrow	$9.50
Seared Muscovy duck foie gras mini poutine	$16
Rocket salad	$8.50
Pickle sampler	$5
Sourdough waffle ice cream sandwich	$5
Red velvet cupcake	$3

I first traipsed 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 indulgent thing I've ever spread on toast. It was such a natural, decadent combination that I wondered why I'd never seen it before. From there I went on to another indulgence: a poutine, a Canadian specialty that traditionally combines gravy, cheese curds and French fries. It's enough to clog your arteries and stop your heart, but at least you'll die happy. Especially at Euclid Hall, where one poutine includes tender chunks of roasted duck bathing in a peppery gravy made of duck fat. I had to salt the dish liberally — but if my cholesterol's going up, my blood pressure might as well, too.



By the time I was through stuffing myself, I knew this was just the beginning of an obsessive, I-can't-quit-you-style love affair.

As with any crush, 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 — thankfully, the kitchen stays open late. Sharing a housemade pickle sampler, we talked about how the bite of the hops-infused version contrasted with the subtle sweetness of the bread-and-butter disks. We followed that with a warm potato salad, with chunks of fingerling potatoes roasted until lightly crisped and golden brown, drizzled with acidic sherry vinegar, combined with housemade spicy mustard and infused with a healthy dose of crispy bacon strips (and, therefore, bathed in rich bacon fat). The Camembert griddled cheese offered another play of flavors, sweet and savory, with the peach preserves bouncing off the tangy Camembert. We left feeling warm and fuzzy, both from a couple of Steamworks Euclidean Ales and the satisfaction that comes from hearty 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 syrupy candied-lemon vinaigrette, made memorable by the slight edge of a chunk of Camembert cheese, **continued on page 40**

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fried crispy on the outside and gooey within. After that, we worked through the housemade sausage sampler, which came with four housemade mustards, ranging from mild and sweet to intensely spicy. I was particularly impressed with the boudin noir, finely ground pork that was slightly sweet from the blood that makes it black, crumbling under the tine of a fork. The rich veal weisswurst was thinner, oozing juice, mildly spiced but deeply savory. There was more sausage in the bratwurst burger: a piquant patty between two halves of a dense, housemade pretzel bun. The sharp Jarlsberg cheese and sour pickled cabbage on the side were welcome additions, but I was glad I had some of that spicy brown mustard left over to enliven it further.

The next two dishes, though, completely won me over. Euclid Hall's chicken and waffles came as a teetering stack of fried poultry and griddled sourdough pastry that was simultaneously sweet, savory and tart, and dusted with walnuts for a surprising mouthfeel. The duck foie gras mini poutine brought another delightful flavor profile: fries with a slice of rich, delicate seared duck liver the size of a matchbook, plated with spicy cabbage kimchi and tied together with the earthy sweetness of a smear of hoisin sauce.

But no romance is without its rough spots. The pig's ears were a disappointment — and a surprise, since the preparation was essentially fat battered and fried in more fat, and, therefore, right on track to being the best idea ever. In practice, the batter didn't fully adhere to the cartilage, which had melted into textureless blobs of grease. And the pork schnitzel paired a dull piece of battered and fried meat with more of the bacon-infused warm potato salad.

Still, the most fruitful relationships are the ones that overcome rough spots, and dessert provided ample opportunity for Euclid Hall to kiss and make up. The same tart sourdough waffles that gave depth to the chicken and waffles lent balance to an ice cream sandwich made with salted butterscotch ice cream. The car-bomb float — creamy Guinness ice cream mixed with Baileys chocolate seltzer and a caramel Jameson shot — was innovative and eminently satisfying, if difficult to consume. And I'd run up the stairs to the first-floor bar for the red velvet cupcake alone: This rendition of the classic substitutes sweet, fluffy seven-minute frosting for the dense buttercream that normally graces the dessert. It's a smart switch: Although I love red velvet cake, usually all I taste is buttercream, and this change gave the confection balance.

I love what Jasinski and Gruitch have done with Euclid Hall. I love it that they've taken risks and found a niche that truly expands Denver's dining scene, in the process showing just how savvy they are as restaurateurs. I love it that they've brought back a wonderful old building, filling it with creative new food that proves beyond any doubt that Jasinski is an innovative chef. And above all, I love that food.

Be still, my heart.

For more photos of Euclid Hall, go to westword.com/slideshow.
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