



Culinary Corner

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REVIEW



Bobby Cochran/CW photos

The action heats up in Rooster's open kitchen, as chefs prep, simmer and sauté to order.

ROOSTER'S WOOD-FIRED KITCHEN

★★★★ out of 5

Location: 6601 Morrison Blvd.

Phone: 704-366-8688; Fax: 704-366-0788

Price range: Small plates, \$4-\$18.

Hours: Starting Feb. 5, Sunday-Thursday, 11:30 a.m.-11 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 11:30 a.m.-midnight.

Details: No smoking; in-season patio dining; takeout; catering service; seasonal menu; limited reservations; wines by the glass or bottle; call-ahead seating.

spinach. Noble can't wait until spring and summer when he can procure all this produce from local farmers; as for now, what he's getting in is really quite good. Buttered butter beans, garden peas and pan-roasted sugar snaps are all high on my list, along with the *pommes frites* (french fries), the rich and creamy au gratin potatoes and the oven-roasted fingerlings. Potato fans should try the homemade vinegar potato chips – thinly sliced and fried to a delicious crisp.

Other sides not to forget: grits and polenta and a variety of roasted mushrooms. Rooster's menu also includes sandwiches of mozzarella, pancetta (cured ham) and arugula; a steak burger; an open-faced grilled chicken sandwich, linguine with clams and a spaghetti marinara.

Rooster's gives diners something to crow about

New perch for Noble

by Heidi Billotto
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European kitchen lore says it is good luck to have a rooster in the kitchen. If that's true, then 2007 will be a banner year for chef Jimmy Noble, the driving force behind his namesake restaurant, Noble's, and his latest culinary venture, Rooster's Wood-Fired Kitchen. Both restaurants are located near South-Park mall.

"It's easy to find great high-end dining establishments in Charlotte," said Noble, "but when it comes to a lower price point, the quality of the food always seemed to be less, too." To dispel that notion, Noble has opened a casual restaurant that is easy on the pocketbook but offers high-quality food. The entire menu is a la carte, following the latest trend of tapas-style dining. Each item is prepared to order and offered as an individual portion on a small plate, a concept that lends itself to sharing and makes a fun and filling repast.

A little of this, a little of that

Start at the top of Rooster's menu with antipasti, soups, salads and pastas. The fried squid and fried oysters are favorites and an easy way to get in the swing of things. Charcuterie fans – or fans of thinly sliced salami, ham and the like – should turn their attention to the cured meat section and order a few

or try the charcuterie sampler. Pair your order with a selection of cheeses, fresh-baked bread, and a glass or two of wine for a European country-inspired meal.

If opting for more than a "ploughman's lunch" as described above, don't miss the arugula salad with chevré and almonds, the rich spinach gnocchi or sizzling macaroni and cheese. For a hearty plate, go to the listing of meats, fish and poultry. Seafoods are grilled or pan-seared. The grilled tuna steak and the raw tuna crudo appetizer are both fabulous as is the pan-seared whitefish. The seared sea scallops, huge, sweet and tender, come three to a plate, while the spit-fire roasted lamb is served sliced and perfectly prepared. Noble himself has a fondness for the spit-fire roasted chicken, served in half or quarter portions, and Rooster's wood-fired wings. Both are delicious, but not as good as the braised short ribs or the oven-fired P.E.I. mussels.

My favorite selections on the Rooster's menu include the pan-seared and wood-fired roasted vegetables and potatoes. One could make a meal out of these two categories alone.

The pan-fried corn is a must. In fact, order two bowls for the table to start. The kernels, cut fresh off the cob then tossed in butter and seasoned with a bit of salt and pepper, are so good you won't want to share. Haricot verts, tiny tender green beans, follow suit as does the fire-roasted asparagus, beets or carrots and the melt-in-your-mouth butter-wilted



A variety of small plates constitutes a delicious repast at Rooster's.

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Top chef showmanship

Situated front and center between the bar and the dining room is Rooster's open kitchen where up to eight chefs work side by side at as many cook stations. Wood-burning oven, grill, rotisserie, charcuterie and salad prep chefs are fun to watch, but the best seat in the house is at the bar in front of the sauté station. Here a single chef simultaneously wields four to six searing hot sauté pans at a time, tossing vegetables or fish and finishing off baked au gratin dishes under the overhead broiler. The heat is on as flames fly from the pans, but these fast-moving chefs seem to keep their cool through it all.

Rooster's kitchen runs under the direction of Brian Zaitz, chef de cuisine. Jeffrey Forrest, executive sous chef, oversees the action, topping finished orders with the appropriate sauces or garnish. Although Noble makes the kitchen at Noble's his home base, he pops into Rooster's to see how things are going.

Warm, rustic fits the bill

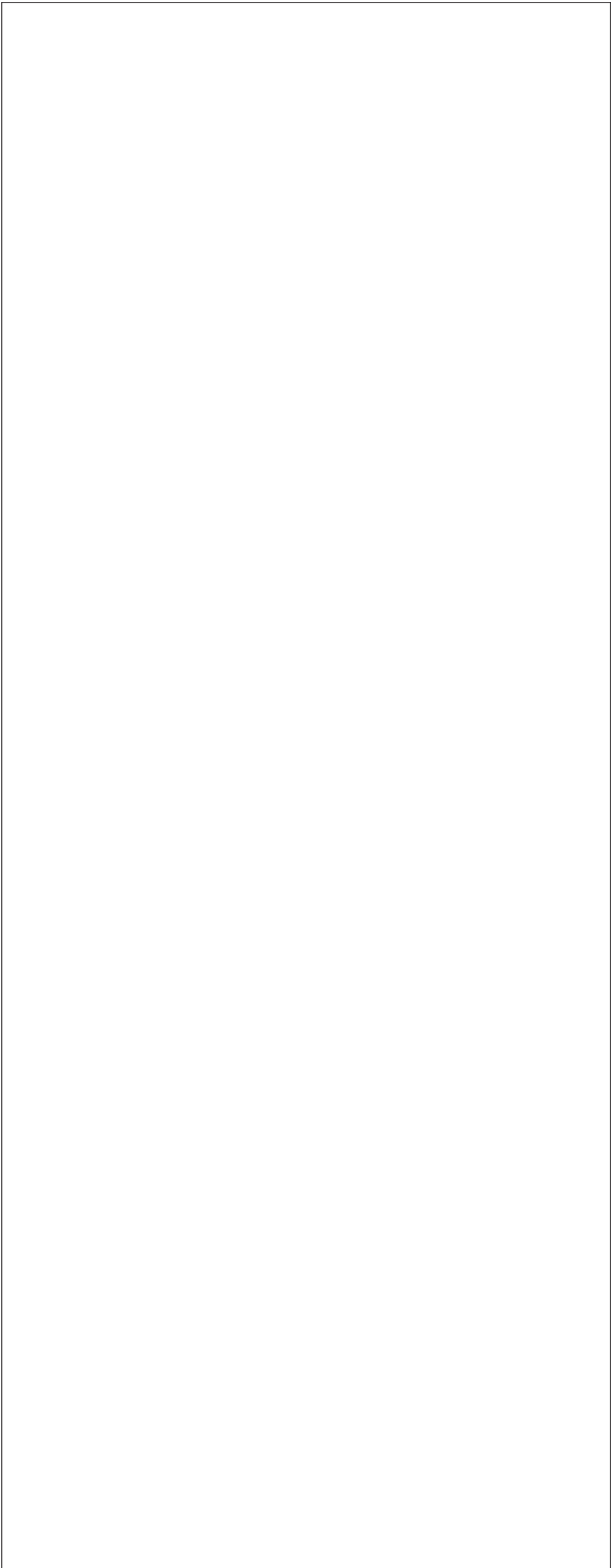
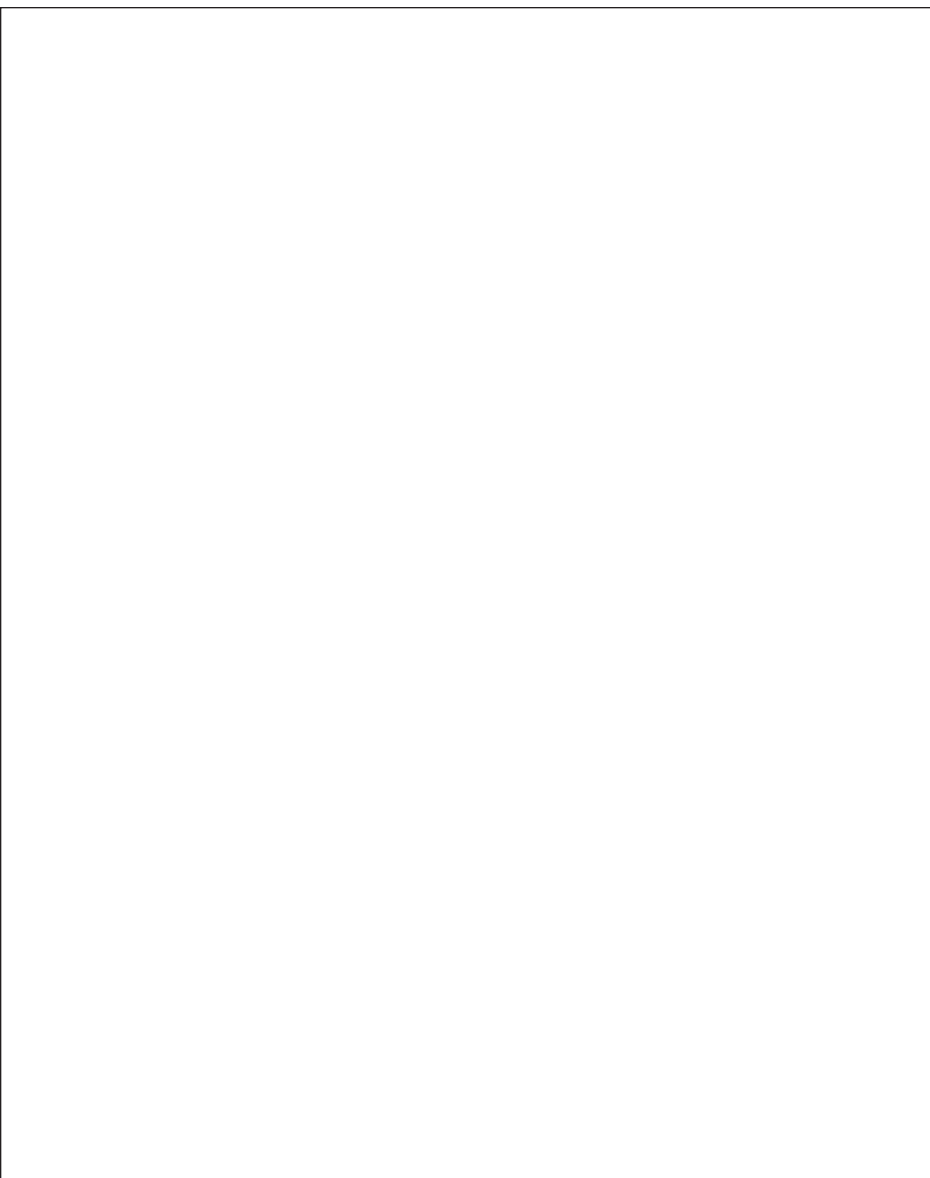
The interior at Rooster's is as pleasing as the food. The space has a European feel with warm rich tones, wood hues, dark chocolate leather booths and mahogany black tabletops. Seating is available at tables, booths and chef-side at the bar surrounding the open kitchen.

A varied selection of wines, all hand-picked by Noble, is offered by the bottle or glass, and bottles are decanted table-side. As warm and cozy as this restaurant is, the only thing that made us uncomfortable was the decorative wall of stuffed roosters. Despite the rooster being the restaurant's namesake, we found it a little creepy to have so many stuffed birds looking down at us as we dined.

More to come

While Rooster's may already be the hot new place at SouthPark, Noble is not finished. He has plans to move his bakery operation – now at Noble's – to the back corner of the restaurant's space, where he will open a retail and wholesale artisan bread bakery. In the evening hours, when bakery business wanes, the space will become a wine bar and waiting area for Rooster's patrons. Before the year is over, Noble plans to open another Rooster's location in Ballantyne.

Currently Rooster's is open only for dinner; starting Monday, Feb. 5, the restaurant will be ready for lunchtime business as well. Rooster's takes limited reservations but has a list for call-ahead seating. The exception is on Valentine's Day, when dinner served from 4:30 p.m. will be by reservation only. □



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What's cookin'

edited by Heidi Billotto
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Super Suppers Charlotte South, 7510 Pineville-Matthews Road, invites

Valentines to enjoy a "Couples Night" session Feb. 14 at 6:30 p.m. Participants will enjoy appetizers, entrées, desserts and beverages prepared by SSCS culinary associates. Then they will rotate through a dozen stations to assemble chef-designed entrées to take home, freeze or cook immediately. The price for the session starts at \$125 and includes assembling six or more full-sized entrées. Participants may split entrées into smaller servings, if desired. Advance registration is required. Singles are welcome to participate as well. To register online or obtain more information, visit www.sscharlottesouthnc.com.



Congratulations again to Charlotte native and cooking contest winner Janice Elder. After heating up the kitchen with a dazzling dessert, Elder took home the \$5,000 grand prize in the Quaker Oats "For Your Heartthrob" Recipe Contest. More than 1,000 recipes were entered in this year's contest, but Elder's sweet, miniature delight stood out above the competition.

Creating a creamy cheesecake perfect for individual-sized appetites, Elder combined oats, salted caramels and cheesecake to win this year's contest. Her trendy recipe plays off the latest craze of adding salty flavors to sweet treats.

Elder is no stranger to winning recipe contests. Already this year she has taken home the Live! Regis and Kelly "World's Best Family Recipe" contest and won first prize at the National Cornbread Festival "Cornbread Cook-Off." Although she

works full time, Elder describes entering recipes as a hobby and says she is drawn to the competitive side of the contests.

Caramel-topped cheesecakes with oat-pecan crust

- 1-1/2 cups Quaker oats (quick or old-fashioned), uncooked
- 1 tsp. vanilla extract
- 3 large eggs, at room temperature
- 1/2 cup finely chopped pecans
- 1/2 cup sour cream
- 1-1/4 cups packed light brown sugar, divided
- 3/4 cup butterscotch-caramel topping
- Sea salt
- 1/4 cup butter or margarine, melted
- 2 (8-oz.) pkgs. cream cheese, softened

Heat oven to 375 degrees. Line 18 medium muffin cups with foil liners. In a large bowl, combine oats, pecans, butter and a half cup of brown sugar, blending well. Spoon about 2 tablespoons of the mixture into the bottom of each muffin cup, then press evenly and firmly to form crust. Bake 8-10 minutes or until golden brown. Remove from oven and cool.

Reduce temperature to 325 degrees. In a large bowl, beat cream cheese on medium-high speed until light and fluffy, scraping bowl occasionally. Add remaining brown sugar and vanilla; blend well. Add eggs, one at a time, beating just until blended. Add sour cream and mix well. Divide batter evenly among prepared muffin cups. Bake 20-22 minutes or just until set. Cool in pans on wire rack. Chill at least two hours.

Just before serving, top each cheesecake with a scant tablespoon of butterscotch-caramel topping (if too thick to spread, soften in microwave for a few seconds). Sprinkle with a few grains of sea salt and serve. Makes 18 cheesecakes. □

Janice Elder's recipe courtesy of Quaker Oats



Photo courtesy of Quaker Oats

Individual butterscotch-caramel-topped cheesecakes satisfy those sweet and salty cravings.