

Paul Fleming's golden touch

By Merrill Shindler Restaurant Critic
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To say that Paul Fleming has a golden touch is to understate the obvious.

This is the man who helped put Ruth's Chris Steak House on the national map. He's the "P.F." in P.F. Chang's China Bistro. He's the "Fleming" in Fleming's Prime Steakhouse & Wine Bar.

And now, he's the "Paul Martin" (his first name and middle name) in Paul Martin's American Bistro. (For the record, his winery isn't named for him. It's named for his wife, Kelly Fleming, as well it should be, for she runs it.)

The first Paul Martin's opened in in Roseville, not far from Sacramento (possibly because Paul makes his home in nearby Napa).

As with all his restaurants, it's built around a high concept - in this case, an attempt to make the regional "locavore" movement into a multi-unit operation, a seeming contradiction in terms. The locavore movement is based on the growing desire of restaurateurs to buy their produce and products from farmers and artisans within a set radius - 50 miles, 100 miles, 500 miles, whatever radius you choose, you can claim the locavore title.

Toss in other buzzwords such as sustainable, organic, natural, line-caught, free-range, farmers market and so forth, and the Whole Foods crowd will beat a path to your door.

And though I might sound a bit jaundiced, I'm really not. I like the idea of knowing that my food came from a farm that really cares about how it's grown. The recent peanut scare was terrifying (a fine example of corporate greed gone postal), and a read through Michael Pollan's "The Omnivore's Dilemma" is properly sobering.

I'm quieted to hear that the ingredients at Paul Martin's are from reputable purveyors such as Weiser Family Farms, Rodriguez Farms, Petaluma Farms, Winchester Cheese (the very best gouda anywhere), Superior Farms and more.

But really, all that is just so much chin music, if the food isn't good. And the thing with Paul Fleming is that his food is always good - and in the case of Paul Martin's, considerably better than good.

Despite the fact that his Fleming's Steakhouse is just down Rosecrans Avenue from Paul Martin's, the competition seems to me to be Houston's across the street - a pair of restaurants that make a powerful statement about the mounting resurgence of American cooking.

In a multiethnic landscape such as Southern California, American cooking has long been lost in the tall weeds. Paul Martin's American Bistro puts it on an equally tall podium; it's a tribute to the cooking that made America a nation worthy of several thousand cookbooks over the years.

It is, first and foremost, a handsome room (his restaurants always are) - 7,000 square feet of used brick, distressed wood, polished concrete flooring, browns and caramel, amber and coral, with a massive bar and lounge area on one side. Though a table is fine, if you can't get one, the bar is a great place at which to sit, eat and watch a game.

There's an outdoor patio, as well, looking out on - well, you know, the towers of El Segundo.

If you show up at lunchtime, there's a good-sized selection of salads and sandwiches, in between the sundry starters (that largely overlap with the dinner starters) and the various "Bistro Classics" (ditto).

There are several sandwiches on the dinner menu - the Bistro Burger, the mushroom burger, the New York French dip and the BLT. But lunch also offers a smoked turkey sandwich made with Winchester Farms gouda and pesto aioli - a sandwich that sounds good any time of the day or night.

And though there's a regular Caesar served at night (and a darned good one at that), the lunch Caesar is made with chicken, the presence of which does a fine job of raising the bar.

But mostly, there's a lunch dish that has me moaning with anticipation - it's the baked frittata with bacon, spinach, tomatoes and Parmesan.

I've long taken great pride in my frittatas, which may be my best quick-prep dish. That it's available for lunch is a good thing. But there are those of us who like our egg dishes for dinner, as well. Bottom line: Set the frittata free. In the meantime, you don't have to twist my arm to show up for lunch.

Come dinnertime, life at Paul Martin's should properly begin with a cocktail, of which there are many, including an Absinthe Martini made with Leopold Bros. absinthe and organic agave nectar. The Bistro Cosmo is made with Gvori Vodka, the Gin Berry Cooler with Broker's Promise Gin.

The names are so intriguing, I wonder if the spirits were chosen for their taste or their moniker. In either case, it all reads very well. As does the wine-by-the-glass list - 22 Hundred Cellars Chenin Blanc, Poet's Leap Riesling, Spell-bound Petit Syrah, Cline Cellars "Ancient Vines" Zinfandel. Really poetry.

The left side of the menu lists the local purveyors who have supplied the ingredients on the menu: Hill Meat Co. Pork, Vande Rose All Natural Pork, Greg Berry Blueberries, Ray Rodriguez Strawberries, Creekstone Farms All Natural Premium Beef.

The list also tells what's "fresh and natural" - Pacific ahi, petrale sole, Pacific white prawns, Marin oysters, Washington oysters, British Columbia salmon, the list goes on. And once again, though it's good to read - as is the logo on the side of the menu that declares "Eat Organic, Believe in Sustainable, Buy Local, Love Fresh" - it doesn't necessarily make the food taste better unless there's someone in the kitchen who knows what to do with it.

And at Paul Martin's, they most certainly do.

Take a bite of the St. Louis-style (dry-rubbed) pork ribs, which crackle with every mouthful, an exercise in herbs and spices that thrill our jaded taste buds.

Check out the Butcher's Board of artisanal smoked meats and cheeses - a great way to begin a meal. Dive into the Castroville artichoke (do they come from anywhere else?), mesquite grilled with its pesto aioli dip. Go for the Bistro Burger, a fine creation, thick and juicy, topped with a choice of Point Reyes Blue Cheese, Tillamook Cheddar, bacon or mushrooms.

Of course, there are the requisite braised short ribs, though there are also braised Solano County lamb shanks, and a fine slab of salmon cooked on a cedar plank.

As a side, don't miss the mac 'n' cheese or the quirkily delicious wilted Bloomsdale spinach with blue cheese, and sauteed brussels sprouts with bacon.

Blue cheese, bacon, aioli, fries, charcuterie, cheese - as the song goes, these are a few of my favorite things. And I can't wait to try the frittata.

review>

PAUL MARTIN'S AMERICAN BISTRO

>Address: 2361 Rosecrans Ave., El Segundo.

>Phone: (310) 643-9300.

>Cuisine: New American.

>Hours: Lunch and dinner, every day.

>Details: Full bar. Valet parking. Reservations essential.

>Prices: Lunch: Appetizers, \$6.95-\$9.95. Salads and Sandwiches, \$10.95-\$14.95. Bistro Classics, \$17.95-\$21.95. Dinner: Appetizers, \$6.95-\$14.95. Sandwiches, \$12.95-\$15.95. Bistro Classics, \$12.95-\$29.95.

>Cards: MC, V.

>Our rating: 3 STARS

on the menu>

Butcher's Board Cheese and Meats \$9.95 per person

Maple Cider Grilled Chicken Skewers \$7.95

Town Dock Calamari \$10.95

Castroville Artichoke \$9.95

Wild Prawn Cocktail \$13.95

Smoked Chicken & Wings \$7.95

Shrimp Scampi \$14.95

Butternut Squash Soup \$7.95

Warm Bacon-Spinach Salad \$8.95

Bistro Cobb \$14.95

House Smoked Salmon Salad \$15.95

St. Louis Style Pork Ribs \$9.95/\$23.95

Bistro Burger \$12.95

BLT \$12.95

New York French Dip \$15.95

Short Ribs \$22.95

"Brick" Chicken \$18.95

Cedar Plank Salmon \$23.95

Solano County Lamb Shanks \$24.95

Skirt Steak \$19.95

New York Steak \$29.95

Merrill Shindler is a freelance restaurant critic.