

Dining Out

Corinna Lothar

Outsized delights from brick ovens of tiny Matchbox

Aromas of Italy over Chinatown

Matchbox really is the size of a matchbox, but it lights up the middle of the H Street block in Chinatown between Seventh and Eighth streets NW with its “vintage brick oven pizzas.”

Chinatown is hard to recognize these days. Except for the imposing arch across H Street at Seventh, Taiwan’s gift to the community, and a surviving handful of Chinese restaurants, little is left to recall the Middle Kingdom.

On the block of Seventh Street where not so long ago glistening ducks hung in restaurant windows and Chinese families gathered around large tables for Sunday dim sum, there are no fewer than five Occidental restaurants and a Marvelous Market across the street are a Chipotle and a McDonalds. See what the MCI Center hath wrought.

All the restaurants have Chinese characters on the windows in a pretense of a continuing neighborhood, however.

It’s a booming neighborhood, which has taken on new life thanks to the MCI Center, the International Spy Museum and the renovation of the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the National Portrait Gallery

Matchbox, which caters primarily to the young and hip but receives

older patrons graciously, has made good use of the tall, narrow building, incorporating three levels. An attractive long wooden bar at the entrance gives way to a little wooden dumbwaiter that hauls drinks to the third floor. Charming. Just beyond the bar is the handsome brick, wood-burning pizza oven, designed and built by an artist from Maine.

There’s just enough room for a few high tables with tall chairs along the opposite wall. On the second level, there’s room for about 20 guests; the top level is the most spacious, with comfortable booths on one side. The kitchen is on the top level.

Decoration is minimal, Owner Perry Smith has made use of the building’s brick walls, complemented by wooden floors, the bar, a few witty color photographs of burning matches and laminated oak tables incorporating matchboxes that look just like small chocolates wrapped in gold and silver foil.

When you go to Matchbox, think pizza. Excellent pizza. The crust is thin and chewy, the toppings interesting and not overwhelming. The meat pizza is topped with pepperoni, sweet Italian sausage and prosciutto; “portabello” has



A worker readies pizzas, cooked in a wood-burning oven, for hungry customers at Matchbox. Below: A dish of crispy rockfish is served with potato, rock shrimp and pancetta hash.



Photos by Jessica Salt/The Washington Times

WHEN YOU GO



The Washington Times

sliced portobello mushrooms, marinated artichokes, garlic and mozzarella; “special” combines grilled chicken, portobello mushrooms and roasted red peppers. All except “fire and smoke” (roasted red peppers, sweet onions, chipotle pepper) include mozzarella, and most are also topped with a good, zesty tomato sauce.

You also can create your own version by mixing toppings from a long list set out on the menu. The pizzas come in two sizes: six or eight slices. The crust on the larger ones appear slightly thinner than the small ones. The pizzas come to the table hot and delicious — the small ones served

RESTAURANT: Matchbox, 713 H St. NW; 202/289-4441; no reservations

HOURS: 11:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday to Thursday and until 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday

PRICES: Starters and salads \$5 to \$13; sandwiches \$8 and \$10; entrees \$13 to \$21; pizzas \$10 to \$17

CREDIT CARDS: All major cards

PARKING: Street parking
ACCESS: Not suited for wheel chairs

on a plate and the large ones on a wooden pizza board.

Although most patrons order pizza, Matchbox has more to offer than just the pizzas. The menu includes appetizers, salads, sandwiches (vegetarian and meat) and seven main courses.

Among the appetizers are mozzarella in carrozza, a traditional Italian first course of deep-fried mozzarella, but in Matchbox's version the classic anchovy sauce is missing; crispy fried calamari, steamed mussels and a "pepperoni-prosciutto roll," a sort of rolled-up calzone.

The mussels — an enormous portion suitable for sharing among two or three diners — are fresh and well-cooked, but curiously dry. Perhaps there's a reason why shellfish should not be ordered in August. The mussels come with a small mound of fennel and chopped tomatoes. Nice but not necessary. The white wine cream sauce in which they are served is splendid, rich and redolent with herbs. The dish is topped with two slices of brioche

dripping with garlic butter and parsley. Divine.

Miniburgers are served in threes, sixes or nines, accompanied by onion straw fries, thinly sliced and delectable. The plump 2-inch burgers are served on a buttered roll with a pickle in the middle, ketchup on the side (and mustard on request). Made of Angus beef, they are wonderful little taste treats, a great group starter. They could be pulled from the grill a little sooner to retain a bit of pink in the middle.

Salads are appetizing, from a simple green salad to romaine with grilled pepper-crusted tuna. An arugula salad with thinly sliced pears and a bit of warm, creamy goat cheese with lots of walnuts is excellent. The salad is somewhat oversauced with a mild, creamy vinaigrette, but it's very good nonetheless.

The pecan-crusted chicken breast, a main course, is generously encompassed in crushed pecans.

The chicken is tender and fresh, accompanied by French beans and excellent mashed potatoes. The chicken, alas, is served on top of the potatoes rather than beside them. It's a generous portion of a well-prepared and tasty entrée.

Other main courses include a crispy rockfish, grilled pork loin, sirloin steak and salmon and two pasta dishes — rigatoni with bacon, peas and mushrooms and chicken farfalle with rapini (Italian broccoli), pancetta and mushrooms in olive oil. The latter is an excellent light pasta dish. The branches of rapini add a slight bitterness to the mushroom- and bacon combination. The large medallions of chicken blend in well. Unfortunately, in the version we tried, the chicken had been oversalted. Sauces are light and well thought out to accompany main courses.

Desserts are limited — two ice creams, a sorbet and a chocolate-chip-and-banana bread pudding that's very sweet and came to the

table hot but a bit tough, (to long in the microwave, perhaps?)

Matchbox has a nice, well-priced wine list with many wines by the glass, including a delightful California rose and a Spanish sparkling wine at \$7 per glass. The restaurant prides itself on an excellent selection of a dozen beers on draft from around the country and the world.

Matchbox is not the place to go for a romantic tete-a-tete or for a business discussion; it's a cheerful, noisy restaurant. But it's the perfect venue for a pre-MCI dinner, lunch anytime you're in the neighborhood or a casual meal when you're in the mood for really good pizza or a quick delicious bite. The menu and the prices remain constant throughout the day. General Tso might regret the encroachment on Chinese territory, but he would like the Matchbox.