

Sausages and shakes

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By Frank Sabatini Jr.

The name Encontro is a play off the Latin verb, “encontrar,” which means “to find” or “discover.” But anyone traversing the commercial heart of North Park will have little trouble spotting the fast-casual eatery that sits stylishly on the lively intersection of University Avenue and 30th Street.

What consumers discover inside, however, is a menu of artisan sausages and other ticked-up fare complementing craft beer and global wines dispensed from nearly two dozen taps.



Thai sausage with peppers and onions at Encontro North Park (Photo by Frank Sabatini Jr.)

This used to be the original location of Heaven Sent Desserts, although the building is unrecognizable after local designer Paul Basile was commissioned to wrap the exterior in reclaimed scaffolding boards and pepper the inside with cedar tables, crafty light fixtures and wall planters bursting with greenery behind the bar.

Also, a copper-surfaced dining counter looks onto a large grill fronting the kitchen, allowing customers to witness the flame cooking of various proteins such as lamb sausages, Scottish salmon, and burgers comprising brisket and chuck roast.

The communal, upbeat feel of the place is exactly what owner John Sarkisian wanted after previously operating Pat & Oscars in Mission Valley with his parents for 10 years.

“I have a passion for people, good food and community, and wanted to do something urban,” Sarkisian said as he ran meals on heavy-metal trays to customers after they placed their orders at a manned iPad station just inside the door.



Strawberry milkshake (Photo by Frank Sabatini Jr.)

But if you're seeking a quiet meal with private seating, go elsewhere. Aside from the enthusiastic patronage that's similar to nearby Waypoint Public, the front windows fold open to the outside bustle in the absence of sound-absorbing design elements. The tables are mostly communal, although thankfully there isn't a flat screen in sight.

All sauces and dressings are made in-house. We especially loved the buttermilk-lemon dressing on a fresh kale salad strewn simply with cherry tomatoes, large croutons and shaved Parmesan Reggiano. Creamy and bright, it tempered the bitterness of the frilly greens while offering a touch more novelty than ubiquitous Caesar dressing.

For an order of Portobello fries dusted in rice flour, we requested a side of basil aioli that normally comes where it best belongs — on Encontro’s salmon or chicken sandwiches. It struck a neutral pairing to the mushrooms, which we ended up devouring in their bare presentation.

A trio of buttermilk cheddar-chive biscuits, priced kindly at \$3, revealed bits of corn within their steamy interiors. Without the accompanying honey butter, they were savory and appetite-inducing. With the butter, they qualified as dessert.

We started also with a pair of mini corn dogs that were chubbier than most given they’re made with bratwurst. Starting from the outer casing of corn batter, which wasn’t overly sweet, and right down to the sausages underneath, these were the juiciest, best-constructed corn dogs I’ve had in ages — clearly not from a factory, and served fittingly with robust whole-grain mustard.

If the craft suds sitting beneath your chin cries for an old-fashion hot dog, the menu obliges with a pork-beef dog adorned with relish and a blend of grilled jalapenos and onions on a brioche roll.



Bratwurst corn dogs (Photo by Frank Sabatini Jr.)

For the house burger, we chose Swiss cheese and slathered on the Worcestershire aioli served alongside. In spite of the zippy sauce, which imparted a quasi-steak flavor to the finely ground meat, it was the charré essence and faultless medium-doneness that made this a memorable burger.

More unforgettable was the sustained tongue burn we encountered from the Thai sausage sandwich, which my fireproof taste buds welcomed immensely, and my companion's touchy palate not so much. Topped with grilled onions and banana peppers, the link contains a mix of shrimp and Duroc pork, plus a riot of spices and minced chili peppers.

As we were assured when choosing it over the other sausage choices — lamb, chorizo and Italian — it wasn't fishy, although the sweetness of the shrimp was pleasantly evident. So were the flavors of ginger, coriander, cumin and lime — much like consuming Tom Kah soup in chewable form, and with the heat nicely pumped up.

Encontro North Park
3001 University Ave.
(North Park)
619-291-1220
encontronorthpark.com
Prices: Salads and appetiz-
ers, \$3 to \$11; sausage, steak,
chicken or salmon sandwich-
es, plus burgers and dogs,
\$6 to \$12

Where sausages, dogs and burgers reside, so do milkshakes. They're the only dessert choice here. But who cares when coveted Hammond's ice cream goes into them?

Available in several flavors, we chose strawberry, which contained big, ripe pieces of the fruit that clogged our straws along with way — just as I prefer after a hearty meal of nostalgic fare made with quality ingredients and snazzy twists.

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