

BY MICHAEL BAUER

Meet and Eat

Glitzy new Town Hall offers something for everyone

Town Hall has become the talk of the town. A convergence of circumstances has worked to make this the hottest opening in the past couple of years. Part of it is timing. With the depressed economy and so few debuts, diners are hungry for a glamorous new place.

The main lure, however, is the team behind this 115-seat American-regional restaurant in San Francisco. Chef-owners Mitchell and Steven Rosenthal are doing double duty: They remain top toques at Postrio, where they've been for a decade, and share cooking duties at their own venture. They've joined with Doug Washington, who has been a maitre d'/manager at Square One, Vertigo, Jardinière and Postrio. Washington has such an engaging personality that his presence alone ensures long lines at the door.

The Postrio connections don't stop there. Pastry chef Janet Rikala Dalton was at Postrio in the mid-1990s, and she's creating a sweet sensation at Town Hall.

Yet there's little relationship between the two places. While Postrio may be the "town hall" of Hollywood, with its glitzy prices and grand decor, the more organic look of Town Hall echoes its roots in the historic Marine Electric warehouse, one of the first buildings to be built after the 1906 earthquake.

The name of the restaurant came to the partners when they first saw the narrow space. They wanted a gathering place, and they also didn't mind that the name evokes colonial New England because the interior combines that small-town hominess with big-city sophistication. The location, at Howard and Fremont streets, is in the middle of a newly emerging neighborhood, across the street from the new Schwab building and several residential develop-



Diners settle in at Town Hall, a new restaurant at Howard and Fremont streets in San Francisco.

colored floors, natural brick walls, a slat-wood ceiling and off-white bead board wainscoting give it a period appeal.

Upon entering, one's eyes immediately rise to the ceiling, where five spidery chandeliers, each with 74 pinpoints of light, have a retro-modern look, kind of like George Jetson meets "Star Wars." The lights originally hung in a movie theater in New York's Spanish Harlem and have been restored and replated for Town Hall.

At the far end of the dining room, substantial seismic beams the color of the Golden Gate Bridge crisscross a wall of paned windows, revealing the urban cityscape beyond. Old-time portraits and modern art fill the walls,

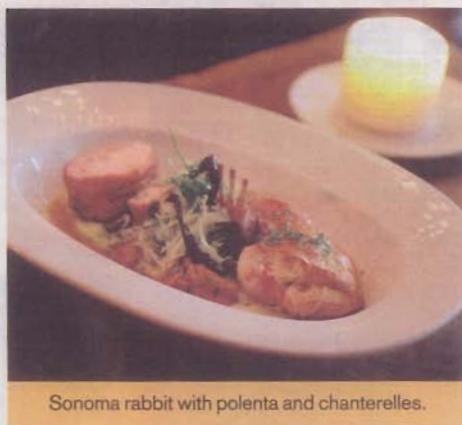
and the generous window ledges are decorated with small bouquets of flowers and a collection of old books, evoking a cozy library. Even the check at the end of the meal is tucked into a handsome first-edition book.

The pedestal tables are handcrafted in the prairie style, and the tables have a kind of schoolhouse-meets-Craftsman look, which helps convey an Adirondack eating hall as envisioned by New York designer Mark Zeff.

The food, like the interior, combines an East Coast and West Coast style. New Orleans seems to be the spiritual home of many of the Rosenthals' combinations, although you'll find some San Francisco, Southern, French and Italian influences, too. While many dishes are delicious, the menu doesn't seem to have a strong point of view and ends up feeling a little contrived.

However, Cajun/Creole is a natural extension for Mitchell Rosenthal, who spent several years cooking at the famed K-Paul's in New Orleans. At Town

(Continued on page 19)



Sonoma rabbit with polenta and chanterelles.

ments. With all this, Town Hall is poised to become a focal point for the area.

The outside of the brick warehouse is dressed up with red awnings and a handsome landscaped plaza featuring large boulders and willowy trees. Once inside, you'd swear the place has been around for decades, gently updated along the way. Ebony-

DINING OUT

TOWN HALL

(Continued from page 16)

Hall, he kicks off the appetizers with smoked chicken gumbo ya ya (\$8), a molten crock of thick, golden broth filled with chicken around a hillock of rice; it has a taste as bold as his patron saint, Paul Prudhomme. Prudhomme's influence is evident on other dishes, including a succulent peanut- and Tasso-crusted pork chop (\$22) served with a celery root and apple puree and a buttery blend of parsnips, carrots and other winter vegetables.

The Rosenthals also feature roast bass (\$19) moistened with lemon butter thick with toasted pecans and propped on a pile of Brabant potatoes and string beans. Just about every restaurant features mussels these days, but at Town Hall they're steamed with Old Bay seasoning and tomato, and topped with a mound of shoestring potatoes that would have been better if served hot.

Classic cioppino has been updated with percatelli pasta (\$23), which resembles double-thick spaghetti. Unfortunately, this San Francisco classic was one of the weakest dishes on the menu. Served in a pretentiously large casserole, it's dotted with mussels, clams, flakes of crab, shrimp, chunks of salmon and other fish. The brothy sauce that should pull it all together is bland and has none of the fire and guts associated with this rustic seafood concoction.

Although you rarely see anything this good in North Beach, roasted veal herb meatballs (\$9) coated in a green peppercorn sauce and arranged on mashed potatoes is something you would expect in an Italian neighborhood.

The chefs honor the Northwest with cedar-planked salmon (\$19) enhanced with a sherry vinegar aioli and served with fennel and shoestring potatoes. The classic spinach salad with bacon dressing (\$13) is paired with cornmeal-fried oysters. The golden orbs are just crisp enough to encapsulate the juicy essence of the seafood; the crust breaks once it hits the tongue and releases a warm saline gush.

Although the food is designed to be American, some dishes have a decided European perspective, often with a few American twists. Classic warm frisée salad with lardons and a poached egg

TOWN HALL

342 Howard St. (at Fremont), San Francisco; (415) 606-3900. Lunch 11:30 a.m.–2:30 p.m. Monday–Friday; dinner 5:30–10 p.m. Sunday–Thursday, until 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday. Full bar. Reservations and credit cards accepted. Lot across the street; street parking, not too difficult at night.

OVERALL: ★★★

Food ★★★ Service ★★★

Atmosphere ★★★

Prices \$\$\$ Noise Rating ★★★★★

PLUSES: Comfortable space that combines old and new; friendly, efficient service; some excellent dishes such as the pork chop, chicken gumbo and butterscotch chocolate pot de crème.

MINUSES: The regional American menu can feel forced.

RATINGS KEY

★★★★ Extraordinary ★★★ Excellent

★★ Good ★ Fair ◻ Poor

(\$) Inexpensive, less than \$10

\$\$) Moderate, \$11–\$17

\$\$\$) Expensive, \$18–\$24

\$\$\$\$) Very Expensive, more than \$25

Prices are based on main courses. When entries fall between these categories, the prices of appetizers help determine the dollar ratings.

★ Pleasantly quiet (less than 65 decibels)

★★ Can talk easily (65–70)

★★★ Talking normally gets difficult (70–75)

★★★★ Can talk only in raised voices (75–80)

★★★★★ Too noisy for normal conversation (80+)

Chronicle critics make every attempt to remain anonymous. All meals are paid for by The Chronicle. Star ratings are based on a minimum of three visits. Ratings are updated continually based on at least one revisit.



Butterscotch chocolate pot de crème.

(\$12) has been slightly changed so that the dressing is made of cider and the lardons are cubes of Smithfield ham.

Trio Sonoma rabbit (\$19), the best of the nine main courses, has a more Italian pedigree. The loin is roasted, the saddle is wrapped in bacon, and the leg is braised and served on herb polenta with chanterelles moistened with natural juices and a drizzle of herb-garlic butter.

Slow-roasted duck (\$21) has a confit-like texture, accompanied by toasted wild rice, pecans and gravy made with spiced dates and gingersnaps, which adds a hint of

complex sweetness to the blend. Grilled chicken (\$18) with shallot-mashed potatoes and mustard herb jus is paired with a banger sausage that adds an unnecessary heaviness to the plate. At times like these, you get too much of a good thing. That's a characteristic of the mushroom lasagna (\$16), in which thick slabs of cheese overpower layers of mushy pasta. The rectangular wedge is served in a bowl, making it awkward to eat, a problem that seems to plague several courses, including the cioppino.

However, desserts (all \$7) should be considered planned indulgences. The most memorable is the layers of butterscotch and chocolate in a pot de crème topped with a thin blanket of butter crunch.

Another dessert, advertised on the menu as "San Francisco's best cup of hot chocolate," is about as thick, rich and decadent as anything I've had. Our waiter explained that it was made with seven kinds of chocolate and a secret ingredient the chef won't reveal.

The staff, led by Washington, takes a casual and caring approach. The servers have to be particularly flexible to maneuver through the tight spaces between tables and to keep customers satisfied when the kitchen gets backed up and the food isn't anywhere to be found. Yet with Washington stopping by each table to chat, no one seems to care. On one visit, a customer was so taken by the service that when she got up to leave, she hugged the waiter.

That's the type of feeling Town Hall evokes. It's clear after three visits that the food will evolve, and watching the changes will be half the fun. ♦

Michael Bauer is the Chronicle restaurant critic. E-mail him at mbauer@sfchronicle.com.

TOWN HALL WINE LIST MIXES IT UP

Town Hall's wine list offers an interesting concept: It strives to be sophisticated in a down-home sort of way. Those who just want a good wine with their meal will find little to criticize, but the more wine-savvy who like to be titillated with unique selections may end up a bit disappointed.

The one-page list features important international names such as Trimbach, Leflèvre, Saintsbury and Shafer and little beyond that. Markup is a bit on the high side, but not unreasonably so, and there are some good values in the higher-priced selections.

Each month, Town Hall spotlights a different winery. In December, it was Joseph Phelps Vineyards, and the five wines offered represented a good value: You could get the 2000 Le Mistral for \$35 and the 2001 Joseph Phelps Carneros Chardonnay for \$39.

In addition, there's a full bar that serves classic cocktails such as Negronis, Manhattans and, of course, the martini.

If you want to bring your own wine, corkage is \$15.

—M.B.

THE ROSENTHALS SIGNED THE LEASE ON THEIR RESTAURANT AT A TIME WHEN MANY OTHERS WERE CLOSING. "IT'S EASY NOW TO SAY IT WAS A GREAT IDEA, BUT IT WAS SCARY THEN," SAYS STEVEN (FAR RIGHT).



BEST CHEFS MITCHELL AND STEVEN ROSENTHAL TOWN HALL

BY JAN NEWBERRY

"It would be a whole lot easier as a chef to fall in love with a single cuisine," says Mitchell Rosenthal. Instead, when the 43-year-old New Jersey native and his brother, Steven, two years his junior, decided to open Town Hall together last November, they drew on every cuisine they'd ever loved. There's the gumbo from Mitch's days in the New Orleans kitchen of Paul Prudhomme back in the mid-eighties, the frisée salad topped with a poached egg from the bistros they fell in love with in Paris, and even the chopped liver Steve learned to make at the New Jersey deli where they worked as teenagers.

"This food comes from our memories. It's what we grew up with and what we've learned over the years as cooks. It may not be what you'd find at the Four Seasons or Le Cirque," says Mitch, listing just two of the restaurants on his long résumé, "but it comes from those experiences. It doesn't seem right to call it American regional—the best I can say is that this food is us."

The crowds that have been blacking out the SoMa restaurant's reservation book since the day the brothers first flipped the switch on the enormous chandeliers they pulled from a movie theater in Spanish Harlem seem to agree. As long as they can eat Bakewell biscuits with Johnston Smithfield ham and slow-roasted duck in gingersnap gravy, people don't much care *what* the Rosenthals call their menu.

Life at the helm of the city's hottest restaurant is nothing new to these two. They've lived through the high times before, back in the early nineties, when they first cooked for the then-trendy Postrio (still a tough reservation to score). That's where they befriended front-of-the-house man Doug Washington, their partner at Town Hall (see page 58), and Janet Rikala Dalton, this year's Critics' Choice for best pastry chef (see page 70), whom they brought on board.

Believe it or not, the brothers are still working the stoves at Postrio, trading off nights, even as they manage their latest hit. But the craziness is worth it, they insist. "Opening a restaurant together is something we always knew we'd have to try at least once," says Steve. "We wanted to open something that was the kind of place where we would want to go," adds Mitch. "The idea is so much from our guts. We haven't made a lot of compromises."

Washington sees another reason for the Rosenthals' success: "They couldn't do this without each other, and they're smart enough to know it." **TOWN HALL, 342 HOWARD ST., S.F., (415) 908-3900.**