

Lake Eats Revisited

We take a trip down Ranch Road 620 for new bites on the scene

BY VIRGINIA B. WOOD

Driving the length of Ranch Road 620 recently, I was amazed by the development explosion since our last big feature on lake-area eateries five summers ago (see “Water Tables,” July 2, 2004). Many of our old favorites remain, some with new enhancements, such as more cascading decks below the venerable Oasis, the beautifully landscaped full-service party pavilion behind the Hill Country Pasta House, and a busy Hey Cupcake! trailer in the parking lot between the Boat House Grill and Smoky J’s Bar-B-Q. Lake-area demographics now support more chain restaurants, a few national retailers, and more than one Pan-Asian sushi bar. Four new places really captured our interest on this most recent visit, and we consider all of them worth a return trip.



Rodolfo and Jessica Buonocore, owners of Ate.Cafe

PHOTOS BY JOHN ANDERSON

JAVA DIVE CAFE

1607 RR 620 N., 266-5885
www.javadivecafe.com

Owner Ronnie Lieberman started with a small coffee shop four years ago, slowly adding pastries and savory foods to his menu. Customer response was so positive that the original Java Dive outgrew its little place and now resides in a spacious corner of the attractive Oak Grove Plaza. In addition to excellent coffee roasted on-site, Lieberman’s eclectic menu also features breakfast, soups, salads, wraps, panini, pastries, and smoothies made with organic and gluten-free ingredients whenever possible. Health-conscious lake-dwellers are certainly taking notice.

HONEY BEE HAM & DELI

1700 RR 620 N., 266-7426
www.honeybeehamlakeway.com

Honey Bee franchise founders Gayle and Neil Laminack retired to the lake area a few years ago and opened an expanded version of one of their stores in the neighborhood. The deli/store offers gourmet spiral-cut ham; roasted, smoked, and fried turkeys; barbecue with traditional sides; deli meats and sandwiches; daily, hot blue-plate specials; and party trays. The friendly spot provides both eat-in and takeout service and will add beer and wine to the menu later this summer. We’re also told that it does huge holiday business in hams and turkeys.

ATE.CAFE

2127 Lohmans Crossing, 263-4933
www.atefoods.com

I was a big fan of Jessica and Rodolfo Buonocore’s the Daily, a sandwich-delivery business, a few years back, so discovering their cheery cafe in the lake area was a genuine treat. The new eatery is a recent outgrowth of their popular weekly dinner-delivery service. The cafe now offers breakfast and weekday lunches, and long-range plans include the addition of Spanish tapas in the evenings, complemented by beer and wine. The food we sampled here – sandwiches, salads, sweets, and fresh lemonade – was by far the best we had on this lake visit, and we look forward to returning.

MIZU PRIME STEAK AND SUSHI

2422 RR 620 S., 263-2801

Former Finn & Porter chef Chris Bauer expects this new venture to debut in late July. The expanded Mizu will feature a New American menu enhanced with some Asian-inspired dishes, five prime steaks, sushi, an à la carte weekend brunch, and a full bar with late-night food and hours. Bauer’s ambitious plans also call for an organic herb and vegetable garden complete with sugar cane and exotic fruit trees. Check out prospective menu items and the progress of the new restaurant at www.facebook.com/pages/Austin-TX/Mizu-Prime-Steak-and-Sushi/75853587777.

STEINER RANCH STEAKHOUSE

5424 Steiner Ranch Blvd., 381-0800
www.steinersteakhouse.com
Bar opens daily at 4pm
Sunday-Thursday: dinner, 5-10pm
Friday & Saturday: dinner, 5-11pm



As a descendant of Texas-born cowboys who actually rode the Chisholm Trail, I’ve always appreciated an authentic representation of the American Western aesthetic, and it just doesn’t come any more authentic than the Steiner Ranch Steakhouse. After ranching for well over half a century on the Western Travis County property, the Steiners sold the ranch for development a few years back, saving a prime hilltop location for the very impressive edifice now bearing the family name. The 14,000-square-foot, multistory restaurant is all stone, glass, and dark woods – it wears the Steiner family’s century of ranching and rodeo history with classy style. My cousins who competed against the Steiners on the rodeo circuit back in the day recall that they always had the best trailers, trucks, and livestock, plus the best-looking hand-tooled boots, belts, and saddles. (Those were probably courtesy of another Steiner family business, the legendary Capitol Saddlery.) Many family items are now decorative accents in the restaurant: Tasteful leather furniture in the “tack room” waiting area, artfully framed photos of family and Western movie and rodeo stars, elaborately engraved belt buckles and other trophies, and beautifully accented boots, belts, and saddles all evoke the atmosphere of a successful ranch estate.

Each of the restaurant’s three floors features indoor and outdoor eating areas, party rooms, and full bars. All of the patios and most of the rooms offer a panoramic view of Lake Travis, especially the third-floor observation deck. Proprietor Bobby Steiner is a gracious host, and his well-trained staff makes guests feel right at home. The positive response from families in the surrounding area is obvious. The first-floor patio is always full of folks enjoying drinks and live music, and weekend reservations are a good idea if you don’t want to wait for a table. Steiner Ranch Steakhouse has the potential to be an outstanding restaurant with many important key elements already in place. Unfortunately, I didn’t encounter anything on the table that was as impressive as the place itself.

Family and friends joined me at Steiner Ranch for dinner recently. Of our appetizer choices, a platter of Elk Toronadas (\$13 for six) suggested by our server offered delicious slivers of tender elk meat on toasts with a snappy sauce, but the seafood cake (\$13) of shrimp, crab,

and lobster had the unappealing texture of shredded paper. The Steiner Greens (\$5 for a side salad) were simply dressed, cool, and crisp. However, an assertive sauce on the tomato and Gorgonzola salad (\$8.50) could not resuscitate the thick slabs of tasteless, underripe tomatoes. Entrée choices delivered hits and misses as well. Our server encouraged those of us who had ordered steaks to check their doneness while she was still at the table, a smart and courteous act on her part. Although my 7-ounce filet mignon with Oscar sauce (\$35) was cooked medium rare as ordered, the beef had a strawlike, pre-tenderized texture, and the pasty sauce included the same shredded-paper (frozen?) crabmeat that marred the appetizer. The house

RESTAURANT
review

mashed potatoes and pencil-thin asparagus paired with the steaks were fine. Friends who ordered the New York Strip (\$34) and the Texan rib eye (\$39) fared much better, pronouncing their steaks satisfying. My cousin’s cedar plank salmon (\$21), on the other hand, was too salty to finish. For my money, the best piece of meat on the table that evening was my sister’s double-bone pork chop (\$19), a thick slab of perfectly cooked pork shel-lacked with a marvelous Port wine demiglace, nestled against a tasty rice pilaf. The meat and sides were delicious and made two hearty meals.

As the sun set on our evening, we ordered three desserts to share around the table and hoped for better results. The bread pudding (\$7) was rubbery and gelatinous, and the crème brûlée (\$7) was dense and grainy. Only the softball-sized scoops of commercial raspberry sorbet (\$4) provided a refreshing note to the end of a heavy meal. Don’t get me wrong: We did enjoy the company of family and friends in a beautiful setting with a convivial atmosphere and very good service. But I think that when a group of six spends more than \$400 on dinner, the majority of the food should at least be as impressive as the saddles.

—V.B.W.