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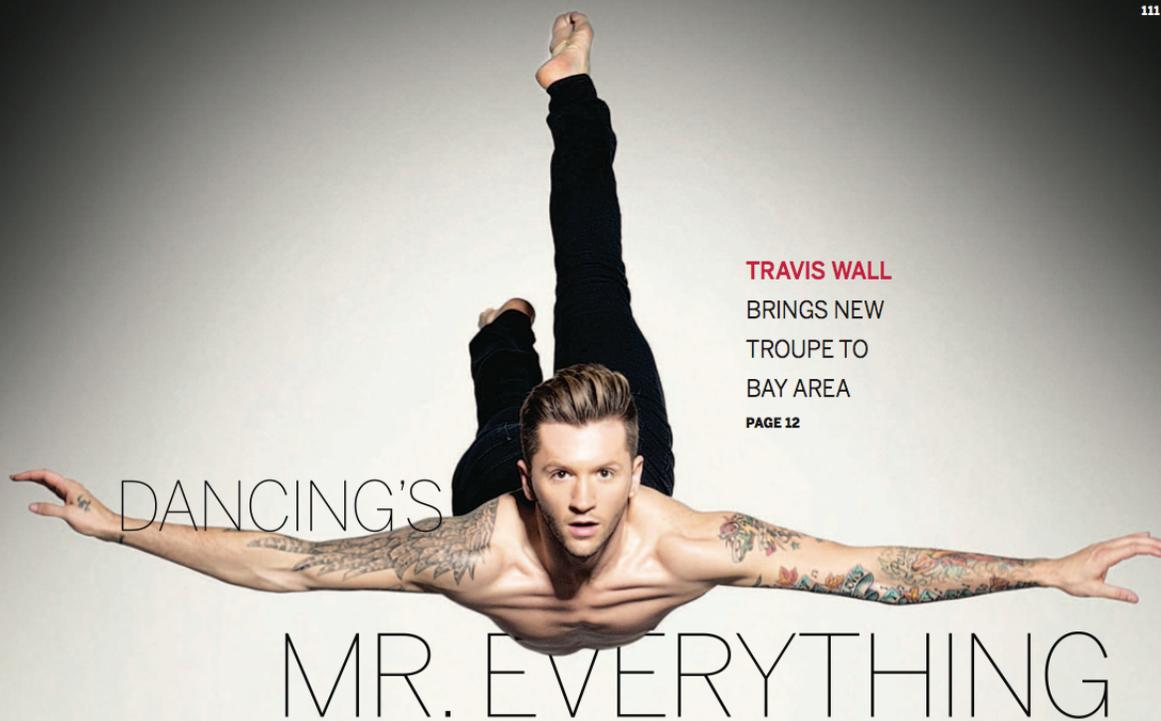
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MR. EVERYTHING

ROB DALY

On the Verge of something tasty

American comfort food bolstered by French technique

By Jennifer Graue
Correspondent

There's a term in journalism called "burying the lead." That's when a reporter leaves the most important information out of a story's first paragraph.

REVIEW

The rules for writing features, such as this review, are somewhat different. So I don't necessarily need to tell you right up front that Verge in Los Gatos serves fresh popovers with sea-salt black-currant butter, but I sure wish our server on our first visit had told us that.

We'd finished our appetizers — a decadent start with mushroom cobbler and duck confit poutine (more on those later) — when we noticed brown paper bags on other tables. As our main courses arrived, I inquired. The server said, "That's the bread. Would you like some?" Already full, we declined.

On the next visit, when our server brought the popovers, I was crushed at having missed these light, airy rolls — which are way more than "bread" — on the earlier visit.

Like those popovers, hidden from view in their paper bags, the restaurant itself is off the beaten path. Located inside the Toll House Hotel, it was revamped earlier this year and renamed Verge because it's on the verge of downtown Los Gatos. Fortunately the parking here, as opposed to downtown,



JOSIE LEPE/STAFF PHOTOS

The interior space is generous at Verge restaurant in the Toll House Hotel in Los Gatos. Executive Chef Albert Nguyen-Phuoc uses locally sourced ingredients to create fusion dishes.

was ample — though again somewhat hidden behind the hotel, by the lobby.

The sleek, modern design of Verge's entrance draws you in. At least half the restaurant's space is taken up by a large, dark bar and lounge area, with its mix of high-top tables and more intimate groupings of club chairs around coffee tables. Toward the back, you'll find more traditional restaurant seating with marble-top tables and attractive midcentury-modern chairs.

It's an inviting, comfortable space for enjoying one of the craft cocktails or a glass of wine from the digital list our server presented on an iPad. Although not as particularly deep list, it was appealing in its diversity — which is also a hallmark of the dinner menu.

Vietnam-born, Paris-trained executive chef Al-



The Verge menu includes the mushroom cobbler, served with creamy béchamel beneath a biscuit crumble with melted Humboldt Fog goat cheese.

bert Nguyen-Phuoc leans toward American comfort food, bolstered by French technique and use of unusual ingredients like red currants, as well as ones such as sriracha that have become overused. Altogether, there were a lot of tempting choices — ones that I hoped would be as

good in practice as they sounded from the menu.

With a barbara from the Sierra Foothills in hand, we greedily dug into the mushroom cobbler (\$9). A mix of mushrooms in creamy béchamel was tucked beneath a biscuit crumble and melted Humboldt Fog goat cheese, whose distinct tang

highlighted the earthiness of the mushrooms, rather than overpowering them. The dish came with toasted rosemary bread on which to spread the mushrooms.

Poutine (\$19) was equally delicious. Though listed as a main course, it also would make a hearty appetizer for two or more to share. Crisp fries were topped with just enough gravy to keep them from getting soggy, as well as big hunks of duck confit and melted cheddar cheese.

We loved that the onion dip (\$8) was served in a hollowed-out onion, with house-made potato chips. But separation of some ingredients gave the dip a less than creamy texture. The chips were good, but would have been better if served slightly warm.

Crisp Brussels sprouts (\$12) with deviled egg were another success. The egg — more of an egg salad, re-

VERGE

★★

140 S. Santa Cruz Ave.,
Los Gatos
408-884-1054,
vergerestaurant.com

The Dish: Revamped and renamed, this restaurant and lounge in the Toll House Hotel on the edge of Los Gatos is worth the short detour past downtown for either happy hour with snacks, or a full dinner.

Details: The vibe here is upscale but unpretentious. The menu features craft cocktails, a nice variety of wines and a menu of spiffed-up comfort food from executive chef Albert Nguyen-Phuoc.

Pluses: Complimentary popovers, strong appetizer menu and an upscale yet comfortable atmosphere.

Minuses: Some dishes, particularly main courses, could use a little tweaking to make them outstanding.

Hours: Dinner nightly 5-10 p.m. (bar snacks served until 11 p.m. Sunday-Thursday, until midnight Friday-Saturday); Sunday brunch 11 a.m.- 2 p.m.

Policy: Restaurant reviews are conducted anonymously, and the Mercury News pays for all meals.

ally — paired well with bits of pancetta in the sprouts, which were drizzled with balsamic vinegar.

With the exception of the poutine, each main course we tried seemed to have one flaw that kept it from being truly outstanding. But all were still enjoyable.

One of the most creative dishes was the duck and



JOSE LEPE/STAFF PHOTOS

Above, executive chef Albert Nguyen-Phuoc is in charge of a dessert menu at the Verge restaurant that includes gingerbread cake with carrot sorbet, below.

Verge

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pork burger (\$17) served on an open-faced macaroni-and-cheese “bun.” The fried macaroni and cheese patty was crisp and creamy and would make a nice bar snack on its own. The burger of pulled pork and duck was well seasoned, but slightly tough. I wondered if it might have been better ground. But overall, it’s a good choice. The jalapeño fries served with it weren’t hot enough — either in temperature or spiciness.

The fried half-chicken (\$24) was perfectly cooked — with juicy meat inside a crisp, tender crust. But the seasoning had a slightly sweet flavor (Chinese five spice, possibly) that kept me from loving it. It’s served without accompaniments, save for some orange and sage. With no sides listed on the menu, our server gave me options of sautéed summer squash, broccoli or asparagus. I chose the latter, but was served a sad dish of squash mixed with carrots, the kind you’d expect to find languishing in a chafing dish at a hotel banquet.



One of the lighter main courses was the sea bass fillet (\$27). On one edge, it was slightly blackened, but the rest was nicely cooked. The lovely marinade featured soy sauce, ginger and honey. It came with a deconstructed salad of fennel, cucumber, grape tomatoes and sea beans — small, succulent green shoots that grow near the ocean and have a great briny flavor. They really popped when grape consommé was poured over the dish. I’d gladly order this again.

The dessert menu lists chocolate soufflé, but warns that its preparation will take 25 minutes — something servers should point out early in the meal,

rather than waiting until bringing that menu. While it was good, I preferred the gingerbread cake with carrot sorbet. Moist and made with a robust ginger, it brought out the best in the unusual sorbet.

Since it’s hidden away, Verge might face challenges at times attracting customers. On both visits, the place was pretty quiet. But despite some faults, I found plenty to like about Verge. The popovers alone are worth driving beyond downtown to enjoy. It’s time to let this secret out of the bag.

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