

B5 EAT+DRINK

Wednesday, April 18, 2018 MORE AT FACEBOOK.COM/MONTEREYHERALD AND TWITTER.COM/MONTEREYHERALD

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THE GRUB HUNTER

Confessions of a meat eater

I'm a sharp-toothed meateater happily married to a rabid herbivore. (While furiously writing this sentence a Freudian autocorrect changed those words to "rabbit oregano." Mmm-mmm. My wife was not amused.)



Mike Hale

Life as a carnivore can be difficult in this world suddenly rampant with meat-shaming. I live in a progressive state in a region known as the world's salad bowl, surrounded by mostly kind-hearted yet doggedly determined veg-heads who love to wax poetic about the peppery notes of ridiculous (I meant radicchio). One of my good friends walks around in \$100 vegan sandals. Another won't drink Guinness because it's filtered using tiny amounts of gelatin derived from fish bladders (who knew?).

What's more, animal welfare groups have begun to monitor my words, urging me to expound the virtues of vegetarianism while indoctrinating me with anti-meat sentiments. Yes, I'm aware that meat is environmentally destructive, ethically problematic and wholly unhealthful for my expanding body.

For those reasons I have dramatically reduced my consumption of meat, especially beef. But it's awfully hard to quit cold turkey, so to speak, and part of me resists merely because of the extra helpings of shame and stigma.

Carnivores have grown tired of defending their choices, or made to feel as if we need to end our meal with the words: "Forgive me, father, for I have sinned."

Once the act of eating meat is presented as slothful, we become more obsessed. Carnivores are like obstinate toddlers: Tell us not to do something and we'll go out of our way to find delicious ways to cook Mary's little lamb.

That blatant celebration of meat is the over-the-top idea behind Valley Kitchen's new Butcher Block Dinner from Carmel Valley Ranch resort chef Tim Wood. Currently it includes a 28-ounce Bone-in Tomahawk ribeye steak, a cut only seen previously on the intro to the "Flintstones."

To say it's huge would be an understatement, like Roy Scheider in "Jaws" saying "you're going to eat a bigger boat." The dinosaur-like bone curves out from the plate like a hockey stick, perfect for a restaurant whose tagline is "come play with your food."

The Tomahawk Experience includes one of the kitchen chefs carving the roast beside tableside on a rolling butcher cart. The all-natural beef is accompanied by grilled sweet onions, Hog Farm's spring asparagus, roasted garlic bulb halves, chef Wood's "I'm Stuffed" Potatoes, and chunks of "French Connection" country bread that soak up all the delicious jus — spiked with HP sauce and chimichurri (total cost \$98).

"It's a showstopper," said Wood. "You don't see that cut very often. It's a fun thing people can do. Perfect for two."

Perfect for two mountain lions. I went with a friend and each of us channeled our best inner caveman. It wasn't nearly enough so they broke out the



Carmel Valley Ranch executive chef Tim Wood presents the Tomahawk Experience to diners at Valley Kitchen.

doggie bags. Now that's shame. Wood said diners love to enjoy such an experience as a special occasion. "You wouldn't want to eat that every night," he said.

To push it over the edge, Valley Kitchen offers 1 oz. pours of famed Opus One (2012) for \$22.

The next day I paid penance with kale chips, bean sprouts, coconut water and hours impersonating a beached whale. I saw vividly the error of my ways.

Until next time. Following are some of my other favorite carnivore experiences, where vegetables become afterthoughts, and where meat sweats will not give you paws (sorry, pause).

CARMEL VALLEY CHOPHOUSE
Proving that the valley is a

safe-haven for meat eaters, the new Chophouse offers a wide range of cuts, some of it dry-aged up to 32 days. My recommendation would be the 16-oz., Angus, bone-in, New York strip (add foie for \$11 or bone marrow for \$7). I also have my eye on the dry-rubbed, smoked, Wagyu brisket.

WHALING STATION, CANNERY ROW

One of my favorite pastimes is sitting at the Whaling Station bar, chatting with Turbo the bartender and the regulars who know to get there early for prime seating.

My go-to order? The famous open-faced steak sandwich off the bar menu. It's prime ribeye atop garlic toast, with a side of an iceberg wedge covered in

roquefort dressing. If the salad lowers your guilt meter, be assured that it also comes with a mound of fries (\$18).

Off the regular menu I would get a full cut of USDA Prime rib roast (cooked for eight hours), with a side of classic Yorkshire pudding (\$48).

MONTRIO BISTRO, MONTEREY

I love chef Tony Baker's dish he calls Lamb on Lamb, a crime to some but a great cheat-night experience for those ready to fall off the meat wagon. Lamb on Lamb includes grilled lamb sirloin, crispy lamb belly, butter beans, creamed leeks and an amazing elixir he calls ham jus (\$33).

Also don't miss Baker's Delight, a 40-oz. prime ribeye

FOOD FOR THOUGHT



FOOD NETWORK
Giada De Laurentis' Creamy Artichoke Soup

Soup is set for supper

By Donna Maurillo

features@santacruzsentinel.com

Soup. We all love soup. And once again, I will be among the "celebrity ladders" at the annual Soupline Supper benefiting the Homeless Services Center. It's tomorrow evening from 5:30-8 p.m. at the Coconut Grove. So, get your groove on, and meet me there. It's always been a great opportunity for me to meet and greet my readers.

Other ladders include Santa Cruz Warriors president Chris Murphy; Santa Cruz Police deputy chief Dan Flippo; Dominican Hospital CEO Nan Mickiewicz; MAH executive director Nina Simon; County Supervisor Zach Friend; Santa Cruz fire chief Jim Frawley; Santa Cruz Derby Girls executive director Regan Eymann; and many more.

Last year's event raised more than \$80,000 to help the organization that helps provide meals and beds for homeless people. But they also provide job search services, addiction treatment, temporary family housing, referrals to veterans' and other services, beds for those recovering from illnesses, and much more.

The soups are always amazing because they come from 40 of your favorite Santa Cruz County restaurants. And they include everything from chicken noodle to minestrone to black bean to vegan and vegetarian delights. Salads, breads, desserts, and beverages are included. And it's all you can eat!

General admission is \$50, or \$20 for children. At the end of the evening, soup in take-home containers will be available for sale. For info, call the Homeless Services Center at 831-226-2512. Or buy tickets at bit.ly/2H4rjra.

The caffe is bene

Several friends and I meet on Wednesday mornings for coffee and conversation at Caffe Bene, 1101 Cedar St., in downtown Santa Cruz. We've gone all over looking for the ideal place, and this is it.

Other places were too expensive, too noisy, too crowded, too slow, or even a bit unfriendly. We love having Ken make the pour-over coffee individually to order. He always has a bright grin and a kind greeting. My special faves are the hot chocolate and the mocha chai.

This is not a high-polish, stainless steel place with con-