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## FIRST LOOK

## Menlo Tavern, the Peninsula's new 'classic'

Stanford Park Hotel's new restaurant pays homage to university's famed 'eating clubs'

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If you're among the many people bemoaning the "fast-casualization" of Bay Area restaurants, then the opening of Menlo Tavern inside the Stanford Park Hotel may be the best news you've heard all year.

The hotel's owners and management team could have opted to turn their El Camino Real restaurant, formerly the Menlo Grill, into some sort of grab-and-go eatery. Instead, they created what already feels like a Peninsula classic, with comfortable leather booths and bucket seats, tasteful Stanford-themed touches, a seasoned chef with a less-is-more philosophy and an experienced, diverse front-of-house and wait staff.

**THE VIBE** » Classic but approachable. Menlo Tavern aims to become the eating-and-conversation club for today's crowd. The idea grew out of nearby Stanford University's legendary "eating clubs," which started forming in 1894 as a response to the "mediocre campus options and stuffy fraternal alternatives," the restaurant says. The dining room's tiled floor pays homage to these social groups, among them Toyon Hall, Entre Nous, Los Arcos, El Capitan, Encino Commons, El Toro and Frenchmen's House.

**THE FOOD** » Executive chef Jason Dalling honed his cooking style during his years with Fairmont around the world. Among the shareable starters, his salt and pepper calamari (\$14) gets a fresh treatment with Hawaiian sea salt and espelette pepper, and the Cowgirl Creamery burrata (\$13) is drizzled with lemon olive oil and served with country bread.



PHOTOS BY KARL MONDON — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Jason Dalling, executive chef of Menlo Tavern inside the Stanford Park Hotel, shows off the Tavern Burger, Harris Ranch Black Angus beef on a pretzel bun.



The Cowgirl Creamery burrata is drizzled with lemon olive oil and served with country bread.



Shrimp cocktail shooters are among the appetizer selections at Menlo Tavern.



An Old-Fashioned cocktail gets a smoke infusion in a smoker box filled with applewood chips.

The Heritage pork chop (\$28) is a free-range Berkshire one served atop sweet potato puree (with a touch of maple, courtesy of Dalling's Canadian upbringing) and green beans, and the citrus-herb roasted chicken (\$24), an organic Petaluma bird, comes with fin-

gerling potatoes and baby carrots. House-made linguine is a best-seller; you can order it with clams in a wine-butter broth (\$24) or with seasonal vegetables and Grana Padano (\$19).

Naturally, there's a Tavern Burger (\$17), Harris Ranch Black

Angus beef on a pretzel bun with two cheeses and a horseradish-spiked sauce. Another casual option: crispy chicken sliders (\$16) on Hawaiian rolls with havarti and spicy kale slaw. Both come with fries.

Ice cream from Marianne's of

Santa Cruz tops the apple cinnamon crisp (\$11) and stars in the too-big-not-to-share hot Ghirardelli fudge sundae royale (\$13), which sits on a glass flower platter whose 12 "petals" are filled with brownie bits, peanuts, waffle cone pieces and sprinkles.

**DON'T MISS** » The smokin' cocktail options, and we mean that both figuratively and literally. The Menlo Tavern has published a booklet-style bar menu that chronicles the history of classic cocktails, and even serious students of mixology are bound to learn something new. For example, did you know that a San Franciscan played a key role in the international success of Irish coffee? Or that Dorothy Parker favored whiskey sours?

If your drink of choice is an Old-Fashioned or a Manhattan (\$15 each), consider ordering a smoke-infused one. Ten seconds in the smoker box, filled with applewood chips, and your cocktail emerges with an intoxicating aroma that complements a number of dishes on the menu.

Not a cocktail drinker? Eight craft brews are on draft, including beers from the locally owned Strike, CaliCraft, Heretic and Half Moon Bay breweries.

**PERFECT FOR ...** » Catching up with friends or gathering the extended family. (You can actually hear each other in this dining room. If you want a livelier space, check out the bar/lounge.)

**GOOD TO KNOW** » The expansive patio will reopen for alfresco dining on June 2. And the restaurant has retained its no-corkage fee policy (in the dining room only).

**DETAILS** » This being a hotel restaurant, Menlo Tavern serves breakfast, lunch and dinner daily, 6:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. weekdays and 7:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. weekends. The bar stays open from 11 a.m. until midnight. Free on-site parking, 100 El Camino Real, Menlo Park. 650-330-2790; www.menlo-tavern.com.