

# Going lowbrow— sort of

*Now calling itself a  
'new American tavern,'  
23Hoyt retains vestiges  
of its fine-dining past*



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*Windows on 23<sup>rd</sup> Avenue provide ample light for diners at 23Hoyt. The restaurant will not be open for lunch during street construction, which is expected to begin in January.*

*Three generations of the Dorsey family, joined by their inlaws from Pennsylvania, enjoy an array of bistro fare—sausages, burgers, macaroni and cheese.*

By Erin DeJesus

When Portland restaurateur Bruce Carey opened 23Hoyt in 2007, the restaurant—smack dab in the middle of 23<sup>rd</sup>'s tony shopping district—featured Carey's star chef Christopher Israel serving up ambitious Mediterranean-meets-Continental fare. The restaurant received favorable reviews, including a nod as one of Esquire's "Best New Restaurants" in 2007.

Then came the recession.

In response, Carey (who also owns Saucebox, clarklewis and Bluehour) transitioned 23Hoyt into a "new American tavern," making its menu and vibe more accessible for these cash-strapped times. Israel left the kitchen in 2008, and Hoyt's new head chef, Chad Church, formerly of the Pearl's Vigne wine bar, offers a menu with an eclectic mix of upscale pub fare. A short, eight-item entree list is bolstered by several sandwich, appetizer and small-plate options (several of them, in true tavern style, are deep-fried). A dozen house cocktails and an extensive wine list round out the menu.

The best way to enjoy the new 23Hoyt is to embrace the tavern theme. Order up a pitcher of beer for the table (there are only four carefully selected brews on tap, but a decent list of bottles ranging from \$3 to \$4.50), then enjoy a selection of appetizers tapas-style. But be warned: The menu, like at many taverns, can be hit-or-miss.

Both the mussels-and-fries and steamed clams appetizers are safe places to start. The order of mussels (\$8) featured a sizable portion of nicely-cooked mussels in a light tomato-base sauce. The accompanying plate of fries was sliced thin and served hot and crisp.

Never mind that the two were an odd pairing (the hot and salty potatoes completely overpowered the mussels' subtle cream sauce). The fries provide the perfect accompaniment to any alcoholic libation. Though served without a side of spuds, the garlicky steamed clams (\$10) fared slightly better than the mussels, with their supertender flesh fully absorbing the white wine sauce.

For a lovely winter warmup, nearly every guest around us was enjoying the popular butternut squash soup (\$7). Sweet and creamy, it featured bits of chanterelle mushrooms and bacon to provide a salty

counterpoint within each bite. A roasted baby-beet and goat-cheese salad (\$8, or \$3 as a "small bite") was simple but refreshing, nicely contrasting sweet and salty flavors between bites of the candied beets and sharp goat cheese.

As any pub should, 23Hoyt has a decent burger (\$11) served with white cheddar and sweet homemade pickles on a flaky brioche bun.

Other tavern favorites, however, didn't work as well.

Onion rings (a popular happy-hour item at \$2 a plate; \$5 normally) were hit-or-miss. One evening, they arrived deliciously light and battered tempura-style; another, they were dredged in a heavy, oily breading.

(If you're in need of a fried item to accompany your beer, items on the small-bites menu, including the fried green beans, almonds and mushrooms, provide a surer bet at \$3 each. The tempura mushrooms, particularly, were light and crunchy on the outside while piping hot within, with a vinegar-based dipping sauce.)

A house-sausage trio and sauerkraut (\$10) plate was also all over the map. Though the two house mustards were appealing, the best of the homemade bratwurst, weisswurst and smoked pork sausages was too mild. The worst, oddly, tasted overwhelmingly like artificial lemon flavoring. (Kudos are earned, however, for the impressive, almost sweet sauerkraut—we couldn't stop snacking on it.)

Of the entrees, the list usually offers two steak, two pasta and two fish options: Stick to those closer to 23Hoyt's Continental roots. The braised lamb (\$17) was a massive portion that featured a tender shank served in a hearty gravy with green olives and fingerling potatoes. While they seemed unnecessary at first, the olives

added a nice tang to the sauce, and the lamb fell off the bone.

The tavern-style fish and chips, meanwhile, featured three chunky pieces of ling cod served over a mountain of the skinny fries. Though serviceable, the fish wasn't worth its spendy \$17 price tag, and the accompanying slaw was off-puttingly bitter.

Four dessert items are on the menu (at \$6 each), including a flavorful but disappointingly dry pear-gingerbread cake. The old menu's signature butterscotch *pots de creme* is still available. If you're in need of an after-dinner nibble, you'd probably do better to stick to the four-item cheese menu (\$8 each or \$16 for a sampler).

Despite the economic downturn (and thanks to Carey's transitional menu), 23Hoyt still attracts an upscale, martini-after-work crowd for both its happy hour and dinner service, and its lunch service boasts a "business lunch" clientele.

During the popular happy hour, be prepared to wait or share a table.

The decor and service remain decidedly upscale, with dimmed lights, house music and tealight-heavy tables. The upstairs dining room remains intact, and the service is dotting without being intrusive.

The new incarnation of 23Hoyt achieves what Carey probably had in mind. It's an upscale version of the traditional "tavern experience," more about the ambiance and atmosphere than the food. But after a pitcher of beer and a plate of 23Hoyt's impeccable fries, you'll be too full (and buzzed) to notice.

**23Hoyt**  
529 NW 23rd Ave.,  
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