Original Joe’s Westlake brings back the past and it’s better than ever

By Michael Bauer  |  April 22, 2016  |  Updated: April 22, 2016 10:34am

People have dinner at Original Joe’s Westlake in Daly City.

The re-envisioned Joe’s of Westlake, now called Original Joe’s Westlake, explains the spirit of its Daly City neighborhood better than a 50,000-word paper ever could.

Hanging in the entryway is a large black-and-white photo of Henry Doelger at the ribbon-cutting for the 1956 opening of the restaurant. In the early 1950s, he was considered one of the largest developers in the world and was at the height of his influence. Joe’s of Westlake was to be the community gathering place for his planned Westlake development of more than 6,500 homes.

Few restaurants are so woven into the fabric of a neighborhood. When it closed in 2014, the outcry was persistent, and during the two-year remodel, a week didn’t pass without somebody emailing to inquire about the status of the restaurant.

The restaurant was purchased and restored by the Duggan family, who also own Original Joe’s in North Beach in San Francisco. It was a labor of love rather than financial incentive that fueled the redesign. Just about the only thing that’s original is the footprint, with its large expanse of windows that overlook John Daly Boulevard near the Westlake Shopping Center that Doelger developed.
The interior of the restaurant feels like a midcentury masterpiece with its terrazzo floors, checkerboard slat wood ceiling and fireplaces in the lounge and two other dining rooms. Joe’s was one of the first full-fledged restaurants to have an open kitchen and dining counter, and that remains at the core of the design, with a back-lit “Westlake” sign above the action where the cooks serve more than 1,200 people a day.

The Duggan family, now led by brother-and-sister team John and Elena Duggan, has proved trustworthy in respecting the past. They pulled off a similar reconstruction when a fire forced the closure of Original Joe’s in San Francisco’s Tenderloin neighborhood. Four years later they reopened the restaurant in the former Fior d’Italia space in North Beach. With the help of Anthony Fish of Arcanum Architecture, who also conceived the Westlake remodel, they captured the essence of the original place while gently moving it into the 21st century so it doesn’t feel like a theme park.

![Photo: John Storey, Special To The Chronicle](image)

A server brings food to a table at Original Joe's Westlake in Daly City.

Fish also worked magic at Westlake. An almost joyous camaraderie lifts the spirits of just about everyone when they walk through the porte cochere and into the curved restaurant lobby, even those who may wait two hours or more at prime time to nab one of the 300 seats. No reservations are taken.

As diners sit in the lounge — either to eat or wait for a table — they are placated with several flat screens showing sporting events and $7 cocktails, including the classic manhattan, martini or negroni. You feel like you’ve been accepted into the Rat Pack if only for an evening, and it makes you want to borrow one of the waiter’s tuxedos and bow tie to fully play the part.

Maintaining the integrity of the food is even more of a challenge, but the Duggans pull that off with the help of executive chef Sergio Santiago, who held that same position in San Francisco, and fellow chef Brenda Mora, who was formerly executive chef of Mastro’s in Newport Beach (Orange County). The menu may lack some of the finesse seen elsewhere in the Bay Area, but it’s the type of food that’s familiar and comforting — gooey spinach artichoke dip ($9.95), bay shrimp Louie salad stacked high with shrimp ($15.95), and baked lasagna ($18.95) layered with house-made pasta and brightly flavored tomato sauce chunky with ground beef. In addition, prices are reasonable and portions are so generous many people go away with takeout boxes.
Menu selections — more than 75 strong — include starters, house specialties and a division by types of protein including veal, pasta and seafood. One box advertises roasted prime rib ($32.95), a generous inch-thick slab of meat served with about a pint of cream spinach and just as many mashed potatoes, all crowded onto an oval platter. The steak and chop category features a 14-ounce New York steak ($30.95) that would surpass what you find at many steak houses, plus you get a side.

In modern restaurants small plates dominate; not so at Joe’s. There’s a great Caesar salad ($8.95); an Iceberg wedge ($10.95) distinguished by the smoky bacon, gratings of hard cooked eggs, tomatoes and crumbles of blue cheese; and minestrone soup ($4.50/$6.50) thick with vegetables and pasta.

Another favorite, Joe’s meatballs ($8), is doused in a sweet tomato sauce; the dish is so generously portioned it would be a main course at most restaurants.

Under house specialties there’s an excellent pot roast ($16.95) with both natural juices and tomato-meat sauce, and liver and onions with strips of crisp-fried bacon ($23.95). This is the type of homey food you’d be hard pressed to find at other restaurants.

Chicken features seven preparations such as piccata ($21.95), Parmigiano ($23.95), Marsala ($21.95) and broiled ($21.95). The choice of sides that come with all main courses includes well-executed fries, mixed vegetables, spaghetti and meat sauce, and the recommended ravioli, stuffed with cheese and thickly ladled with sauce.

Pasta, which includes nine selections, is nicely cooked, although on combinations like spaghetti with prawns ($23.95), the kitchen didn’t add enough salt to the water so there was a disconnect between the pasta and the sauce. These missteps are minor and probably can’t be avoided when putting out more than a thousand plates a day.
The veal piccata ($25.95) — one of a half dozen preparations of this meat — consisted of a half dozen thin slices, doused in lemon sauce and topped with about a half jar of capers. It may be excessive, but it’s the type of indulgence people love, especially when sopped up with warm, yeasty sourdough bread brought to the table at the start of the meal. Anyone who has been there a few times understands, and appreciates, these excesses.

Seafood, as you might expect, is the smallest category with only five choices but it includes one of the restaurant’s signatures: calamari steak Dore ($21.95). There are also golden fried prawns ($24.4), 10 shrimp served with classic cocktail sauce and tartar sauce that tastes like it’s been freshly made and whipped for lightness. Many people head for the charbroiled salmon with lemon sauce ($24.95), but my favorite is Joe’s filet of sole in a delicate egg batter.

If you’re confused by the breadth of the menu, simply go with anything that starts with Joe’s, including the “famous hamburger sandwich” ($13.95) where the beef is laced with onions and served on a just-crisp sourdough roll.

Desserts are just as impressive in their generosity. We were pleasantly surprised with the golden color and tender crumb of Joe’s butter cake ($8), with a huge scoop of vanilla ice cream in the center and drizzles of chocolate sauce. It looks as if it would easily serve the table. Joe’s also does very good butterscotch pudding ($8) updated with salted caramel, and bombolini ($8), warm Italian doughnuts accompanied by both strawberry and chocolate sauces.
The interior of Original Joe’s Westlake with its generous tufted booths in Daly City.

Another aspect that sets Joe’s apart is the caring and professional service, just as you would expect from a restaurant of this type where the staff is formally attired. It’s as if the staff realizes it’s preserving a piece of history by not letting the experience sink to maudlin nostalgia.

The customers have also seemed to embrace that change. Few restaurants have such a diverse following: old-timers who weave their walkers through the gaggle of diners waiting for a seat; families who crowd into the generous tufted booths; and young couples who are there for date night. It’s a restaurant that fulfills just about everyone’s expectations.

I’m pleased to say that Joe’s is back — better and more popular than ever.

★★★

Original Joe’s Westlake

Food: ★★ ½

Service: ★★★

Atmosphere: ★★ ★ ½

Prices: $$$

Noise: Three Bells

11 Glenwood Ave. (at John Daly Boulevard), Daly City; (650) 755-7400. Open daily 11 a.m.-11 p.m. Sunday–Thursday and until midnight Friday–Saturday. Full bar. No reservations. Credit cards accepted. Free lot.

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