

Redwood Grill: California Comfort Food

At Redwood Grill, a tin of popcorn takes the place of the bread basket and grilled avocados are stuffed with a light, dill-infused shrimp salad. The veggie burgers are made by hand, and the Brussels sprouts are crispy and addicting. A symphony of drinks being shaken and stirred floats up to an airy ceiling of exposed beams and skylights. Redwood Grill may have taken the spot at Woodside Plaza once filled by the Little Copenhagen restaurant, but it is safe to say, this is not your grandparents' eatery.

Fueled by visions of community and California comfort food, Renee Barton opened Redwood Grill in July. She leapt into the restaurant world a novice, armed with a fearlessness that only a tenure in the investment and start-up worlds can give. "I say that I just treat it like having my first child. I have no idea what I'm doing, there's a hundred reasons not to, but at a certain point, you've just got to jump in."

Barton's leap of faith is doing more than offering a new place to eat; she's shining the spotlight on one of the town's unsung stalwarts, the shopping center on Woodside Road at Massachusetts Avenue. Nestled between the Post Office and a Taekwondo studio, the restaurant's location was essential to Barton's vision of bringing people together — and not just downtown.

"In my gut, I just knew this was the right location. I think that there are enough people that want a place like this, in the neighborhood, that it's going to work." If the first two months have been any indication, Barton is right. She's not complaining, but what she thought would be a "soft opening" in July, quickly became grand. "I posted one message on Facebook saying that we were open, and we had people waiting outside to be seated. We were unprepared for that," Barton admitted.



Renee Barton

When the novelty of a new restaurant at a plaza not known for change wears off, the food and cocktails will easily shoulder the pressure. Chef Mario Ochoa is Barton's culinary partner, and helped take her ideas of California comfort food from concept to plate. "What I have really enjoyed about working with Ochoa is his collaboration, he understood my concept, and then added his own twists."

Those twists on classic comforts are dotted throughout the menu. The "devilish" eggs are punctured by shards of candied bacon. With the grilled cheese sandwich, a trifecta of cheeses topped with caramelized onions and a mustard horseradish spread, it is officially acceptable to order grilled cheese on a date.

If the mood for wine strikes, chances are that General Manager Justin Wright will be on hand to help with the pairing. A veteran of Four Seasons, he has a sense for hospitality the same way that Barton is called to rally the community around the table.

In Barton's former start-up life, investors were king. At her restaurant, it's the team. "I was in a unique position when I was hiring. I had to sell people on my idea, to take this leap of faith with me."

Sipping a golden-hued cocktail called Redwood Summer, Barton claims to be tired, but she is the picture of a calm and collected leader. Perhaps that is due in part to her team-focused approach. Barton knows her strengths are in business and operations, and she openly accepts the guidance of her seasoned wait staff and management. "You can't do this without good people, and I have an amazing team."

As for the Redwood Summer cocktail, it's bright and crisp with cucumber and pineapple, and is one of the inaugural seasonal drinks that pays homage to the town. Another is the Red Morton Mule. Muddled with strawberry and mint, it presents a rare opportunity to sip a drink named after the place generations of Redwood City kids learned to swim. "I wanted to also have a drink named after Stulsaft (park), but people had a hard pronouncing it," Barton said with a smile and a shrug.

On one wall, images of redwoods and Woodside Plaza in its early years are a reminder of a halcyon time that can feel lost in this era of booming development and change. The locals have taken notice. "I've had so many people see the photos and share their memories of getting ice cream at Thrifty's and shoes at the kid's bootery next door."

Even in Redwood Grill's infancy, it seems that Barton's vision, and her knack for weaving modernity and nostalgia through food, cocktails and ambiance, are bound to take flight. Redwood Grill is located at 356 Woodside Plaza. **C**