

Eating Out



Sundance The Steakhouse serves up succulent New York strip steak.

A MECCA FOR MEAT

After 40 years, Sundance retains its high standards and charm

by Dale F. Bentson

1974 was a momentous year. Richard Nixon resigned the presidency, the Oakland A's beat the Los Angeles Dodgers in the World Series, "The Sting" won best picture, the price of a first-class stamp rose to 10 cents, Robert M. Pirsig published "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance" — and in Palo Alto, restaurateur Robert Fletcher opened Sundance Mining Co.

The rest is history. Sundance Mining Co. morphed into Sundance The Steakhouse and is thriving in its 40th year. Sons Aron and Galen Fletcher are now running the classic American steakhouse on El Camino Real in Palo Alto with topnotch food, attentive service, an excellent wine list and decor that exudes old-

school charm.

In these days of celebrity chefs, restaurant empires, glitzy chains and often unintelligible menus, Sundance stays with one location, keeps the facility in tip-top condition, trains the staff in fine-dining details, ensures the kitchen maintains the highest standards and uses the finest ingredients — and the menu needs no translation.

Robert Fletcher and partner Richard Hamner acquired the Stanford View restaurant when the property became available in 1974. Both had worked for corporate restaurant chains: Fletcher was in charge of

building and opening Hungry Hunter restaurants, while Hamner was a regional manager for Jack in the Box.

After the successful launch of their Sundance Mining Co. steakhouse, the pair founded four Pacific Fresh restaurants, which they sold in 1991 to a Japanese com-

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Longtime customer Bob Siegmann, left, catches up with waiter James during the lunch hour at Sundance.

Sundance The Steakhouse
 1921 El Camino Real, Palo Alto
 650-321-6798
sundancesteakhouse.com
Hours: Lunch: Monday-Friday,
 11:30 a.m.-2 p.m.
 Dinner: Sunday-Monday,
 5-9 p.m.;
 Tuesday-Saturday, 5-10 p.m.

- Reservations
- Outdoor dining
- Credit cards
- Private parties
- Lot Parking
- Noise level: moderate
- Alcohol: full bar
- Happy Hours
- Bathroom cleanliness: excellent
- Children
- Takeout



The menu at Sundance features Dungeness crab cakes with sherry cayenne aioli.

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pany. After an amicable separation, Hamner went on to found the Una Mas chain of Mexican eateries.

Fletcher mined Sundance. His

sons grew up in the restaurant business but chose different career routes. Galen became a certified public accountant with Ernst & Young while Aron charted

a course at Smith Barney (now Morgan Stanley). According to Galen, on Christmas morning in 1992, Robert asked his sons whether they were interested in taking over the business, or whether he should sell it. It was time in his life to take a step back.

By 1996, both brothers were working at Sundance full time — Galen first and Aron a few years later. In 2000, Robert retired, but he retains a financial and spiritual interest in the business.

“My dad was almost a stranger when we were growing up,” Galen recalled. “He was always working, always on the go, moving around from city to city opening up Hungry Hunter restaurants. I was determined that for the first 20 years, I wanted to fully participate in my family’s life. I didn’t want to miss out. I wanted soccer practices and all the school activities. I needed to stay in one place, concentrate on one business.”

It seems to have worked out for everyone, especially the dining public who keeps the place packed, or nearly so, throughout the year. Besides the dining rooms, booths, quiet nooks and private dining areas, there is a lively bar scene with a long list of contemporary cocktails. The wine list boasts more than 400 labels, mostly California, and most of that cabernet — the perfect pairing for beef.

Slow-roasted for eight hours, the certified Angus prime rib is offered in 8-ounce to 14-ounce cuts: \$32.95 to \$42.95. On a recent visit, the juicy, flavorful meat was served exactly as ordered — rare, with minimal fat. Creamy horseradish and hot au jus were served on the side. The meat was accompanied by vegetables and a choice of potato or rice.

Fork-tender was the 13-ounce USDA Prime New York strip steak (\$48.95). The steak was served at the optimum temperature: hot, but with time enough for the meat to have rested after cooking. Meat proteins heat and coagulate during cooking, and moisture is driven towards the center. If the meat rests for a few



Tidbits

by Elena Kadvanly

CHO’S, RESURRECTED ... Palo Altans’ favorite hole-in-the-wall dim sum spot **Cho’s Mandarin Dim Sum**, which closed earlier this year after receiving a sudden 60-day notice from the landlord, is being resurrected in downtown Los Altos. The restaurant, which sold potstickers, pork buns and the like on the cheap for 35 years at 213 California Ave., announced the news on its Facebook page last Friday, Dec. 12. “Something new is coming to Los Altos,” the post reads, with a photograph of the new restaurant at 209 1st St. According to Yelp, the space was most recently occupied by Chris’ Fish and Chips and is near the corner of State Street. The 2,337 people who signed a Change.org petition to keep Cho’s open on California Avenue will surely be lining up as soon as the restaurant reopens.

‘OCCUPY THE FARM’ ... Documentary “**Occupy the Farm**” tells the story of the battle over the Gill Tract, a large plot of University of California-owned land in Berkeley that the university planned to develop and community members wanted to preserve and use as farmland. The film, directed by **Todd Darling** and produced by **Steve Brown** of Woodside, documents a day in April 2012 when hundreds of people flooded onto a section of the land and “occupied the farm,” planting 15,000 vegetable seedlings in protest. The film premiered in early November but is just now making the rounds to Palo Alto, with a one-night showing at **The Aquarius Theatre** this Monday, Dec. 22, from 7:30 to 9:30 p.m. “Occupy the Farm” filmmakers and “special guests” will also

hold a Q&A following the film. The screening was made possible through **Tugg**, a website that allows people to request that films come to local theaters. Tugg requires a certain number of advance reservations in order to confirm an event; the threshold was met earlier this week, and a limited number of tickets are still available. Go to tugg.com/events/12449 to reserve a spot.

FOOD TRUCKS GET FIVE YEARS ... The uproar in Menlo Park over the arrival of **Off the Grid**, a weekly food truck market held in the Caltrain station parking lot, is but a distant memory. The city’s Planning Commission (on which this writer’s father serves, full disclosure) granted a unanimous, long-term blessing to Off the Grid on Monday night with a new five-year permit. The market — one of more than 20 that Off the Grid operates throughout the Bay Area — first launched in February 2013 at Merrill Street and Ravenswood Avenue, with about 10 trucks serving up eats every Wednesday night. **Benjamin Himian**, Off the Grid’s director of business development, told the planning commission on Dec. 15 that about 600 to 800 people came each week during the summer, but that number has now dropped by approximately 60 percent, the Almanac reported. As a result, Off the Grid has been closing at 8 p.m. instead of 9 p.m. and will go on hiatus from Dec. 22 through Jan. 4. The longer hours will return in March, Himian said.

Check out more food news online at [Elena Kadvanly’s blog](http://ElenaKadvanly.com), [Peninsula Foodist](http://PeninsulaFoodist.com), at paloaltoonline.com/blogs/.

GOLDEN GLOBE
 NOMINEE
 BEST ACTRESS • REESE WITHERSPOON

SCREEN ACTORS GUILD
 AWARD NOMINEE
 BEST ACTRESS • REESE WITHERSPOON

Wild

BASED ON THE INSPIRATIONAL BEST SELLER BY CHERYL STRAYED

SCREENPLAY BY NICK HORNBY

DIRECTED BY JEAN-MARC VALLEE

CAST: BERGEN SWANSON, NATHAN ROSS, NICK HORNBY, REESE WITHERSPOON, BRUNA PAPANDEA, BILL POHLAD

PRODUCED BY CHERYL STRAYED, WRITTEN BY NICK HORNBY, DIRECTED BY JEAN-MARC VALLEE

AWARDS: SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL 2014, TELURIDE FILM FESTIVAL 2014, TORONTO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL 2014

CRITICS PICKS: Los Angeles Times, CriticsPick

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minutes after it is off the fire, the protein molecules relax and reabsorb the juices. That’s what makes a perfect steak.

But Sundance offers more than just great beef. The Pacific swordfish (\$29.50) was sea-breeze fresh, dusted with spices and grilled over an open flame. The fish was succulent and moist.

Sauteed New England sea scallops and wild gulf prawns (\$28.50) were plump and meaty, nestled in a reduced white wine garlic butter sauce with an ambrosial hint of fresh garlic and pepper that tickled the palate.

The chicken Marsala (\$22.95) was a pounded-thin breast, sauteed in Marsala mushroom sauce and then served under a blanket of earthy, fragrant mushrooms.

There were plenty of appetizers too: mouthwatering golden brown crab cakes (\$14.95), fillet mignon spring rolls (\$12.95)

served on a gingery Asian salad and Idaho potato skins (\$11.50) with cheddar cheese, smoked bacon and chopped green onions.

The steakhouse classic wedge salad (\$9.95) comes topped with house-made blue cheese dressing, chopped tomato, crumbled blue cheese and smoked bacon. The clam chowder (\$6.50 cup; \$8.50 bowl) was loaded with clams, potatoes and onions.

Desserts aren’t made in-house, but to house specifications. The signature mud pie (\$8.95) — coffee ice cream with an Oreo cookie crust in a puddle of hot fudge, topped with whipped cream and chopped peanuts — is big enough to share and has been on the menu since opening day. Also good was the New York cheesecake (\$7.95) with a strawberry fruit sauce.

What’s not to like? Happy 40th, Sundance. ■