

Love in Brookside

Though our critic tried to resist, he ultimately fell for Avenues Bistro.

By Charles Ferruzza

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No Kansas City neighborhood has been more overdue for a restaurant renaissance than Brookside. Perhaps because the area is so close to all those dining venues on the Country Club Plaza, locals haven't demanded much more than the few places they've had: a couple of saloons, a coffeehouse, two no-frills sandwich shops, Joe D's Winebar Café, Carmen's, Sharp's and Bella Napoli (Jake Imperiale's combination Italian market, espresso bar and tiny *ristorante*).



Michael McClure

Details:

816-333-5700. Hours:
11 a.m.-9 p.m.

Monday-Thursday, 11
a.m.-11 p.m. Friday, 7
a.m.-11 p.m. Saturday,
7 a.m.-8 p.m. Sunday.

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Belgian-style pommes
frites \$4.95

Lobster-and-crab
cakes \$12.95

Scandinavian salad
\$9.95

Champagne chicken
\$14.95

Lobster ravioli \$17.95

Basque-style chicken
\$15.95

Crème brûlée \$5

But the last year has seen a boomlet of activity. Joe DiGiovanni sold his namesake restaurant (although it continues to operate under the Joe D's name, and the menu hasn't changed much). The former bagel shop was reborn as a pretty Japanese restaurant, Domo Sushi & Grill. And a block or so to the west, in the corner spot that for decades was occupied by the Sanford Saper Dry Cleaners, a couple of enterprising restaurateurs have created a charming bistro with an ambitious menu called **Avenues Bistro Brookside**.

A Brookside friend of mine calls it "the restaurant you want to hate but can't." His reasons for wanting to hate it? "There's no place to park, the décor is too precious for words and it's filled with middle-aged, middle-class white people." But he says he eats there anyway because — what the hell — the food is good and reasonably priced. "Brooksiders have re-fined tastes, but they're basically cheapskates," he confesses.

I had my own reason for wanting to hate the place, and it had nothing to do with middle-class honkies or the scarcity of parking — although it *is* a pain in the ass. Eight weeks ago, I received a phone call from someone announcing himself as the "sommelier" of the Avenues Bistro.

"This restaurant is very new, and the owners realize there are kinks to be worked out," the young man said in a surprisingly unfriendly tone. "As someone who has opened new restaurants before, *I* know it takes time to get everything worked out. So we are requesting that you not come to this restaurant for a couple of months. That is, until it's ready to be reviewed."

After I caught my breath, I blurted out: "I don't review restaurants until they've been open at least a month, but I'll eat in your joint whenever I damn well want to." Besides, I told him, I'd been on staffs that opened five new restaurants. "I have

some news for you," I added. "If the kinks aren't worked out in the first few weeks, they'll be kinking up the place until it closes."

When I told my friend Lorraine, who's also a former server, about this odd conversation, she burst into laughter. "He told you that you couldn't go to the restaurant? Let's go *tonight!*"

The idea was enormously tempting, but I had other plans, and, frankly, the snotty sommelier had soured me on the place. God forbid, I should be a voyeur, peeping in on a new business in all its kinky glory. I decided to wait a long time before sneaking in.

But it wasn't long before I started hearing good things about Avenues Bistro from some of my friends who are typically critical of new places. They also loved the sommelier. "He's charming and knows everything about wine," one of them gushed. "He even brought some grapes to the table!" I felt my eyes rolling to the

back of my head.

Yes, I thought, it was going to be hard not to hate the place.

But after waiting 30 days, I'm here to eat my words.

You can't hate Avenues Bistro. The owners — Jason Rubis and former Ritz-Carlton chef Joe Birch — just won't let you. I haven't seen two men so determined to pull together a winning concept since PB&J's Paul Khoury and Bill Crooks opened their first restaurant, the Paradise Diner, more than a decade ago. Rubis and Birch (and even one of their investors) are all over the place, greeting guests, picking up dirty dishes, delivering dinners and ironing out the remaining kinks.

I only experienced a couple of minor irritations. On the first night I dined in the restaurant, when the server brought out my dinner — a plate of grilled German sausages — I cringed when I saw a glob of mashed sweet potatoes. Those sticky spuds hadn't been on the "Bavarian Grill" menu description, and I would have nixed them immediately if they had been; sweet potatoes are among the few foods that I detest. When I asked the server about the mashers, she giggled and said, "Well, it's supposed to come with the Rosti potato, but our chef was in a happy mood and gave you these instead."

The chef's happy mood nearly put me in a foul one. But I ate around the dreaded sweet potatoes and enjoyed the plump bratwurst and weisswurst sided with sauerkraut and a pile of warm, sweet red cabbage. Birch later told me that it had been a terrible mistake: The Bavarian Grill isn't supposed to come with any potato because customers were complaining that it was too much food (an argument rarely heard in a Kansas City restaurant).

I noticed the other kink when my friend Bob was going on and on about his champagne Chicken and I could hear only every third word. When this narrow dining room is at capacity, it's a cacophony. Still, I got the message: Bob loved the juicy bird breast in a crisp, feather-light crust, draped in shallot-butter sauce flavored with sparkling wine. "It's one of the best things I've ever eaten," Bob said.

He ordered it again a few nights later, when we returned for dinner with Dan and Cathy. She was immediately charmed by the dining room's Chianti-red walls, the stylish light fixtures and our waiter, John, who is a professional actor when he's not schlepping dishes. Impulsively, we decided to start with a plate of lobster and crab cakes and a "basket" (that's an understatement) of what the menu calls Belgian-style *pommes frites*. I've eaten the crisp, pencil-thin double-fried frites in Brussels, and they weren't anything like this Brookside version, which we agreed tasted a lot more like good ol' American steak fries. But they were addictive nonetheless, served, as in Belgium, with several dipping sauces. Equally superb were the crab-and-lobster cakes, which were nearly as big as hockey pucks. *Sacre couer*, maybe this kitchen does serve too much food!

We also shared a Sicilian steak, mozzarella and tomato salad that Cathy didn't like. (She detected an odd aftertaste from the grilled beef strips.) I found the concoction amusing. After all, Sicily isn't known for steak — my grandparents rarely saw beef before they came to America — and the mozzarella was too chewy. Far more interesting was a Scandinavian salad with fluffy goat cheese, pickled beets, candied pecans, cranberries, red onions and avocado. I'd never think of combining avocados with Scandinavian cuisine, but it was a tasty combination of textures and flavors.

Obviously, this isn't a traditional European restaurant, even if the menu does run the gamut from Basque chicken and tortellini Roma to Austrian-style calves liver. But Birch is faithful to the spirit of classic dishes, including that night's special, a luscious veal piccata that had Cathy swooning. And I've tasted plenty of variations on the dish known as lobster ravioli, but none can match the sinful decadence of Birch's puffy pasta pillows stuffed with bits of sweet Maine lobster and blanketed with a sherry-scented, pumpkin-colored tomato-cream sauce.

"It's excellent," Dan said after a few bites, "but almost too rich to eat." He took most of his dinner home.

Not me. I'd ordered a sautéed chicken breast, prepared Basque-style with bits of salty prosciutto, roasted red peppers, artichoke hearts and sun-dried tomatoes in an evanescent wine-cream sauce that was **so good, I was tempted to lick the plate.**

For the finale, Dan and Cathy nibbled on a dense wedge of flourless chocolate gateau, and Bob lapped up a satiny creamy vanilla crème brûlée.

"I love this restaurant," he announced, just as the young sommelier — much friendlier *off* the phone — stopped by our table carrying a plate heaped with tiny grapes.

As he launched into a passionate spiel about wine and fermentation, I realized that if I didn't like Avenues Bistro Brookside so much, I'd swear I hated the place.