

January 29, 2010

Vibrant Flavors, Served When the City Sleeps

By TARA DUGGAN

Open Late

LEERS ROS THAI 730 Larkin Street (O'Farrell Street), (415) 931-6917; open 11 a.m. to midnight daily.

NAMU 439 Balboa Street (Sixth Avenue), (415) 386-8332; Sunday to Tuesday, 5:30 to 10:30 p.m., Wednesday to Saturday, until midnight.

NOMBE 2491 Mission Street (21st Street), (415) 681-7150; Sunday, Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, 6 to 11 p.m.; Friday and Saturday until 2 a.m.

RYOKO'S 619 Taylor Street (Post Street), (415) 775-1028; daily 6 p.m. to 2 a.m.

TOYOSE 3814 Noriega Street (45th Avenue), (415) 731-0232; daily 6 p.m. to 2 a.m.

VIETNAM 620 Broadway (Grant Avenue), (415) 788-7034; daily 9 a.m. until 3 a.m.

Out by the cold expanse of Ocean Beach is not where you'd expect to find good food at 2 a.m.

And there, four blocks from the Pacific, Toyose doesn't appear very welcoming. It has no windows and only a cartoon chicken sign to mark it. The door opens to the narrow confines of a converted garage — the place is known to regulars as the "chicken garage."

But inside, most of the tables are filled with people sharing plates of Korean fried chicken and bottles of soju "cocktail," a cloudy mix of the distilled spirit, yogurt and fruit juices.

"We order a bunch of little things to share," said Ravi Kapur, who sometimes drives seven miles across town after finishing a night as chef de cuisine of Boulevard restaurant to eat and drink with other chefs. "We snack on food, drink beer."

The list of places in San Francisco that offer food until midnight and beyond is short. Like Toyose, the most appealing tend to be refuges for people in the restaurant business. Not always willing to settle for a burrito or burger, they look for places offering vibrant flavors and a warm atmosphere, and that means Asian places like Korean soju bars, izakayas using local ingredients, and a few sushi, Thai and Vietnamese restaurants.

"I don't expect the French Laundry at 3 a.m.," said Zach Weldon of Alameda, who was happy to come across late-night sushi at Nombe in the Mission District, rather than settle for Jack in the Box. "But I'm into more high-end food, and I'll pay for it." Mr. Weldon meets his girlfriend, Jenn Hernandez, for a late meal several

times a week after his work as a bartender and waiter, and he called the lack of options frustrating.

“We had to drive to Berkeley the other day to get Thai,” Ms. Hernandez said.

Nombe’s chef, Nicolaus Balla, takes an izakaya approach, with California flavors. Bruce Hill, the chef at Bix and a fan of the place, said the pork belly was “pretty brilliant.” Mr. Balla also tosses fried brussels sprouts in mint and a citrusy togarashi spice mix. He douses beef tongue in green Laotian curry for Asian-fusion tacos, and mixes kimchi into roast pork ramen. The menu is available until 2 a.m. weekends.

A similar mix of flavors can be found at Namu, which draws on the Korean heritage of the brothers Dennis, Dan and Dave Lee, who run it. In a quiet part of the Richmond District, Namu feeds diners until midnight most nights with dishes like green beans and [tofu](#) sesame cream with crisp guanciale from Boccalone, and a hamburger cooked rare, dressed with daikon and kimchi relish. Sojus are inventively flavored, one with smoky Pu’er tea.

Late-night sushi is rare, so Ryoko’s near Union Square, which stays open until 2 a.m., has become another industry favorite. Chris Wong, one of the chefs and partners at Luella, often brings co-workers to fill the warren of back rooms in the underground restaurant. “The fish is cut perfectly and it’s very fresh,” said Mr. Wong, who also orders the handmade gyoza.

Though a nearby location of Osha Thai Noodle Cafe stays open later, Lers Ros Thai in the Tenderloin has become a destination for striking regional dishes that can be hard to find elsewhere, like thinly sliced smoky pork shoulder, duck larb and stir-fried pork belly with basil. The command of flavor by the chef, Tom Silargorn, comes through in details like green peppercorns on the vine and palate-awakening dipping sauces.

Though Lers Ros has a moody, contemporary look, décor isn’t always a priority at late-night spots. Nombe took over the lease from a taqueria, barely softening the starkly white room with paper lanterns. Toyose’s thrift-store fixtures and frayed bamboo partitions suggest a bar in the tropics after a mild hurricane. Yet Toyose’s funky atmosphere is part of its appeal, since there is better Korean food elsewhere, at least earlier at night.

Korean food isn’t what Richie Nakano wants when he leaves work as sous chef at Nopa on Divisadero Street, itself an industry hangout that closes at 1 a.m. “It’s crazy eating that kind of food that time in the morning,” Mr. Nakano said. “All the condiments and all the chili paste and everything. It gives you nightmares.” Mr. Nakano sometimes heads to Vietnam, a scruffy place in Chinatown that serves pho until around 3 a.m.

“I’m looking for something really comforting and simple,” he said. “Something that is in one pot or bowl. Nothing complicated or too serious. It’s just so you can have a chat before you go home.”

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