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South Charlotte WEEKLY

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Carolina WEEKLY newspaper group

Ballantyne Zone

A home away from home



Anna Dykema/SW photos

Fire Station 24, 7132 Pineville-Matthews Road, has a deep-seated tradition of community service, a close-knit, familylike environment and saving lives in the burgeoning area.

Station 24 firefighters continue 28-year tradition saving south Charlotte lives

by Brian Carlton
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There are two things you don't talk about at Charlotte Fire Station 24: guns and hiking. It's one of the first things you're warned about when you walk through the door. Capt. Dick Pickard has a lifelong passion for both, and once a conversation on either subject starts, it's hard to stop.

Firefighters at Station 24, (more on page 11)

N.C. 51, Providence traffic signal to be upgraded

CDOT plans to improve traffic flow along 13 miles of N.C. 51

by Brian Carlton
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Traffic signals on N.C. Highway 51 will be outfitted with technology designed to reduce congestion on the road, despite opposition from District 7 Councilman Warren Cooksey, who said he's against using federal money to pay for the project.

The Charlotte City Council voted 7-4 on Nov. 23 to spend \$629,000 in federal economic-stimulus dollars to install fiber-optic cables and cameras on traffic signals along 13 miles of N.C. 51, including its intersection with Providence Road. The cables would allow for faster signal changes at intersections, and the cameras would allow the Charlotte Department of Transportation to monitor traffic and better set signals to accommodate traffic flow. Construction is expected to start by the end of December and end in February.

Cooksey said he disagrees with using federal economic-stimulus dollars to fund local projects. "I have consistently said that ... is bad policy for the city," Cooksey said. "We ought to be paying for this project ourselves, either through our own city capital program or through the state's program. (The money) is being borrowed from the next generation which is not, in my opinion, the way the city of Charlotte should be addressing its problems."

Also voting against the project were District 2 Councilman James Mitchell, District 3 Councilman Warren Turner and District 4 Councilman Michael Barnes, who said the money should go to projects in other neighborhoods

(more on page 9)



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DIVINE DINING AT BLT STEAK

by Charles Jenkin
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Delicious. Delightful. Decidedly different. All of these words describe the amazing dining experience that is BLT Steak, the new restaurant in Uptown's Ritz-Carlton, Charlotte.

The abbreviation doesn't stand for bacon, lettuce and tomato. It stands for Bistro Laurent Tourondel. Tourondel is the award-winning chef who's taken the nation's culinary scene by storm over the last five years. He was named Restaurateur of the Year by Bon Appétit magazine in 2007, and when the first BLT Steak opened in Manhattan in 2004, Esquire magazine named it one of the country's best new restaurants. Just when you thought all things steak already were available in the Queen City (times two), BLT adds an exciting menu of signature items with French flair.

Mere words don't do it justice. The restaurant serves only the best U.S. Department of Agriculture Prime cuts and Certified Angus Beef, all naturally aged for maximum tenderness and flavor. Cooked to perfection, finished with herb butter and served in hot, cast-iron pans, the beef has a deep flavor profile that imparts that wonderful feeling that says "I've arrived."

Popover heaven

It starts with popovers. These enormous rolls are flaky on the outside and custard-creamy on the inside. They'll wow you. You almost don't need the sweet, spreadable butter that's served with them, but go ahead and indulge. The crock of warm chicken liver pâté that's placed on the table is also fantastic; the flavor dances across your palate.

There are several tantalizing appetizers, from a clear, clean-tasting tuna tartare with avocado and perfectly balanced soy-lime dressing to the unique Lobster Salad "Cobb" Style and hamachi with honey-orange sauce. If you're a bacon lover, start with the Grilled Double Cut Bacon. Need I say more?

You can, of course, begin your meal by going green. The Caesar, chopped vegetable and beefsteak tomato salads go perfectly with a glass of white wine or champagne. For something fresh and earthy tasting, go for the roasted beets with endive, walnuts

and Gorgonzola. Ultra-fresh, premium ingredients abound.

There's the steak ...

As the name implies, this is where you'll find uncompromising steaks. The finest beef available is cooked at a mind-melting 1,700 degrees. When steak is seared at such high heat, the exposed marbling takes on a sweet flavor that can't be duplicated at home or even on most commercial grills. New York strip, rib eye and filet all are great choices. The porterhouse weighs in at 40 ounces – plan to share and arrive hungry. Very, very hungry. But know that you don't have to spend a mint to dine here. The Black Angus hamburger with fries is \$16 and just may be the best burger you've ever tasted.

... And then there's the sauce

Not that you need it, but an array of delicious sauces is available to accompany the beef. There are three mustards, plus red wine, peppercorn, horseradish, Béarnaise, Roquefort, barbecue and, of course, steak sauces. All are made in-house. My favorite by far is the Béarnaise. Thick and velvety with a generous lemon flavor, it marries perfectly with the filet.

Every evening, there's a blackboard menu describing the specials. I'll always have fond memories of the dry-aged Delmonico with marrow butter and merlot jus. I call it a re-constructed steak because the chef trims away all the fat around and within the beef, shapes it into a rectangle and cooks it at that ultra-high heat. The result is absolutely heavenly and unique – the deep flavors explode with each bite.

If you don't want steak, there are several other options, from braised short ribs and rack of lamb to Confit Lemon-Rosemary Chicken, Herb-Parmesan Crusted Veal Chop and 7-Spice Duck Breast with foie gras and mango mustarda. Fresh bounty from the seas includes sautéed Dover sole with soy caper brown butter and out-of-this-world Acacia Honey Marinated Alaskan Black Cod. Branzini, spiced tuna and grilled Maine lobster round out the seafood selections.

Every item is a culinary work of art, including the sides. The onion rings are piled high and look too good to eat. Don't let the jalapeño mashed potatoes' green hue startle you – the spicy side is a delectable

pairing for any of the steaks. Roasted Tomatoes Provençal, poached green beans, gnocchi pomodoro and, if you're a fan, Brussels sprouts with bacon all can be had. I had the pleasure one evening of enjoying an enthralling special: Chanterelle mushrooms prepared in tarragon cream with garlic confit – delectably different and palatial on the palate.

The desserts are just as grandiose. Crêpe Soufflé with passion fruit sauce is fantastic, as is the Warm Chocolate Tart with pistachio ice cream. Sticky Toffee Pudding Cake with Georgia pecan ice cream is a treat, and especially wonderful is the Peanut Butter Chocolate Mousse with banana ice cream. Specials are offered nightly, like Triple Chocolate Pecan Pie with coffee ice cream.

What's for breakfast?

A scrumptious breakfast is available every morning at BLT Steak. It's so worth the trip uptown, and with valet parking, it's a no-brainer.

Freshly squeezed orange juice is a refreshing start. Next, order the BLT Popover. One of those huge, baked delights is split in half and toasted, then topped with creamed spinach, sliced ham, sunny-side-up eggs, and ample amounts of béchamel and hollandaise sauce. It's served with freshly made home fries, a broiled tomato and a side of bacon.

Another winner is the Eggs Ritz, similar to eggs Benedict but with spinach, crabmeat, poached eggs and a delightful cayenne-lemon hollandaise. And instead of an English muffin, it all floats above a kind of shortbread round. It's simply sumptuous. Also outstanding is the melt-in-your-mouth French toast. Be sure to get a side of applewood-smoked bacon – yum.

The atmosphere is pleasing to the eye but not overstated or even opulent. The bar is long, sleek and inviting, as are the cocktail tables. A glass wall of wines separates the dining room from the kitchen. Of course the wine list has a great many opportunities to indulge, be it by the bottle or the glass. There's a private dining room for a couple dozen lucky guests – definitely say yes to that invitation. As you'd expect, the servers are personable, gracious and efficient without ever rushing guests.

Be it breakfast, lunch or dinner, this is a dining experience to be savored. From the moment I was greeted warmly until I left, I was made to feel special. Visit BLT Steak for that very special occasion, or simply for a memorable dining experience. I await my next visit with outright enthusiasm. □



Photos courtesy of BLT Steak