

# The Philadelphia Inquirer

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Rabbit tetrazzini with pappardelle noodles in sherry cream with leeks and mushrooms.



DINING REVIEW

**VERY GOOD**

CRAIG LABAN

## Whetstone Tavern

A local approach to classic American fare stands out in a year of throwback cooking.

Staff photographs by **Tom Gralish**

In a year in which new restaurants have been steeping in retro Americana, Whetstone Tavern is doing something many of the others have not: turning more squarely to local flavors for inspiration.

Co-owner and chef Jeremy Nolen, 38, comes by his menu muse by birthright. He's the son of a hotel chef who himself grew up cooking in the tradition-minded taverns and hotels around Reading.

That's how we end up with a side of creamed corn kernels vaguely reminiscent of a Cope's corn casserole, though with a sweetness bumped to a brown sugar high even by Berks County standards. Or a thinly sliced roast beef sandwich

on a potato bun reminiscent of the "bar beef" he came to love in Reading. There's a plated pork chop homage to Philly's roast pork sandwich tradition. Nolen's wife and pastry chef, Jessica, turns out a stellar take on shoofly pie, its "wet bottom" molasses filling a richly sweet bass note to its airy pastry crumble topping.

And on the edgier flip side of local favorites, Nolen is also the first chef in a long while to venture forth with a genuine bowl of that colonial Philadelphia hit, pepper pot soup. This brisket-based vegetable stew, served in all its spicy, tripe-filled glory, is not for everyone. But those unafraid to wrap their lips around a spoonful of honeycomb-dimpled offal will find it offers a

uniquely tender source of comfort that soaks in the soulful and lustily clove-spiced stew.

It's a brave move putting tripe on the menu, especially as Nolen and his partner, Brauhaus Schmitz co-owner Doug Hager, make a bid to become a true neighborhood restaurant and stop the revolving-door vibe that has seen tenants swiftly jettisoned from this Queen Village corner space, including East of Amara, Coquette, Adsum, and Tapestry.

Nolen, whom I reviewed at Coquette, believes

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those failures were related to poor business practices more than any curse. And he and Hager have sunk serious resources into construction to maximize the address' potential. They dug out the basement for a prep area to open more work space in the kitchen, added a dining room in back (glinting with old knives gifted by fellow chefs) — a move that added 24 inside seats to a space that loses 28 from the sidewalk when the weather turns cold.

I like what designer Brian Leahy did to the space, brightening the room with light earth tones and rustic accents, installing actual sound treatments (that help, even if it's still pretty noisy), and adding a half-wall to elegantly separate the casual bar and its TVs from the dining room.

Nolen and Hager's choice to focus on American comforts, as opposed to another German concept that might compete with their Brauhaus, is also smart. The drink list, likewise, leans more toward Euro bistro wines and cocktails than craft beers, with some nice choices (Petit-Chablis; sparkling rosé vinho verde) even if the glass markups are high.

The charcuterie made at Brauhaus is a great way to start a meal here (the Riesling-infused salami and fenugreek-scented basterma are particularly fine) and is one good cross-use of kitchen resources. So are the desserts from Jessica, who makes pastries for both restaurants and is about to open her own bakery nearby, the Little Bird.

What this kitchen cooks on-

site, however, resulted in a few more hiccups than I expected. A seared cod over brothy cockles was so overcooked my guest declined to eat it (a decision I supported, and the server promptly and correctly removed it from the bill). The fritterlike clam cakes, based on a recipe from Nolen's Rhode Island side of the family, had too little taste of clam. The French onion soup was too sweet with port. The chicken wings in kung pao sauce had the fantastic flavors of ginger, sesame, and Chinese black vinegar, but the finished sauce was too thick and sticky.

When things go well, however, and they often do, Whetstone reminds us convincingly of some forgotten pleasures in classic American cooking. This is how we end up with a much overdue revamp for tetrazzini, updated and slightly lightened here by deconstruction with house-made pappardelle noodles glazed in sherry cream with beech mushrooms, leeks, and toasted slivered almonds, a tender leg of slow-roasted rabbit set beside. A good old crab cake — once ubiquitous in town, but lately M.I.A. — makes a satisfying appearance with loads of sweet crustacean bound with a little mayo and crushed Ritz crackers.

A platter of oysters was perfectly baked (and not too much!) beneath the buttery crunch of herbed bread crumbs. Beef tartare, which turns glossy when you mix in that Green Meadow Farm egg yolk, is zingy with Dijon, anchovy, and green peppercorns.

Nolen taps some late-season ripeness with a gorgeously creamy corn chowder, its surprising sweetness set off by the sparkle of Espelette pepper and croutons of garlic toast. That garlic bread makes another cameo beneath the lush tomatoes and tangy caper berries that tumble between creamy hunks of burrata cheese.

A bit too much was going on — and not artfully — in the stuffed zucchini, with too-rough-

ly chopped tomatoes, capers, and bitter broccoli rabe.

But that broccoli rabe was just the right note to pair with that juicy “Passyunk” pork chop, whose creamy polenta side rang with the Italian Market twang of sharp provolone cheese. The roast chicken was also outstanding, the juicy bird wrapped in tawny brown skin that snapped with the piquancy of preserved lemons and capers.

Nolen’s contribution to another of the year’s big trends — the return to smaller patties — is memorable. His “Dad’s burger” with quarter-pound LaFrieda brisket-chuck rounds came double-stacked and layered with oozy Cooper’s sharp and a ripe tomato over shredded iceberg in special sauce. I took a bite, and it rained down juice on the plate.

Jessica’s desserts are just as satisfying. The pastry-wrapped apple dumpling, which could do with a little less sugar, was a caramelized crust just shy of perfect. But she hit all the right notes with a nutty chocolate-peanut butter layer cake, that deep molasses shoofly pie, and a hybrid diner classic that melds an airy cheesecake with a crowning ribbon of intense lemon curd topped by gorgeous roasted peaks of fluted meringue.

In a year of throwback cooking, this elegant dessert mash-up — along with Whetstone’s many other plates — proves the past can still offer up some tasty new possibilities.



VERY GOOD

## WHETSTONE TAVERN

700 S. Fifth St.; 267-239-0906; whetstonetavern.com

The team behind Brauhaus Schmitz has turned to Americana — and in particular co-owner chef Jeremy Nolen’s Reading roots — to inspire the updated comforts on the menu at this friendly

neighborhood tavern in Queen Village. The corner space has been brightened with appealing rustic touches (including old knives from Nolen’s chef pals). The kitchen slips over a few details of execution, but, overall, there are more than enough approachable good flavors here that Whetstone has a shot to break the string of short-lived tenants (Adsum, Coquette) in this seemingly prime real estate and become a solid neighborhood destination.

**MENU HIGHLIGHTS** Burratina; steak tartare; deviled ham; house charcuterie; pepper pot soup; roasted corn soup; baked oysters; Passyunk pork; rabbit tetrazzini; roasted chicken; crab cakes; Dad’s burger (make it a double); pork rinds; creamed corn; chocolate-peanut butter layer cake; maple custard pie; shoofly pie; lemon meringue cheesecake.

**DRINKS** Given the Brauhaus connection, there are, naturally, good beers here. But whiskey and wine are the real focus of this bar, including a few nice cocktails (White on Rye; Apple Barrel) and several bistro wines — Domaine d’Elise Petit Chablis, Broadbent’s Vinho Verde Rosado (pink sparkler!), and Mommessin Beaujolais-Villages — I’ll happily drink, even if the glass markups are relatively high.

**WEEKEND NOISE** The corner space is tight and naturally noisy (in the mid-80s) but would be much worse without the significant soundproofing added with renovations. (Ideal is 75 decibels or less.)

**IF YOU GO** Brunch Monday through Friday, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Dinner Sunday through Thursday, 5-10:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday, until 11 p.m. Late-night menu daily until midnight.

► Entrees, \$9-\$25.

► All major cards.

► Reservations highly recommended weekends.

► Not wheelchair accessible. (One step at entrance, and bathrooms are not handicap equipped.)

► Street parking only.



“Dad’s burger” is a juicy double stack of quarter-pound brisket-chuck rounds with Cooper’s sharp, tomato, and lettuce.



Chef and co-owner Jeremy Nolen, who grew up cooking in taverns and hotels in Reading, brings his background of local American cuisine to Queen Village.