



WINE, DINE & DEAL

Stark's Steakhouse

521 Adams St.
Santa Rosa
(707) 546-5100
www.starkssteakhouse.com

Steakhouse
Lunch Mon.-Fri., dinner nightly
Entrées (dinner): \$20-\$41
Full bar, excellent wine list

Stark's Steakhouse, owned by Mark and Terri Stark of Willi's Wine Bar/Seafood Bar and Monti's, has the polished ambiance of a deco-era supper club, complete with dark wood furniture, deep red accents, soft lights and a sound system playing the likes of Louis Prima and Frank Sinatra. The lounge area has plush, red leather seats, a fireplace and a shapely bar.

My friend Amy and I perused the cocktail list, which features traditional American favorites and the interesting tales behind them.



The meal started with a small, fresh-baked loaf of bread, topped with melted butter and fresh chopped garlic and parsley. Our appetizer was the Ahi tuna tartar, rich with a truffle oil/miso dressing and placed atop thin-sliced cucumbers. Accented with toasted pine nuts and string-thin fried leeks, it was dusted with a fine black truffle layer.

The butter lettuce salad had whole leaves topped with thin-sliced green apples, candied walnuts, gruyere cheese and a light amount of a peppery, creamy dressing.

Starks specializes in steaks, but has a little something for almost everyone, from a beet and goat cheese ravioli to duck, chicken, arctic char and more. Amy and I, however, went for the beef. We also chose a half-bottle of Robert Biale Petite Sirah (meaty nose, deep color, spice and earthy flavors—it matched the steaks perfectly) from the extensive wine list that has the most half-bottle selections I've ever seen.

The a la carte menu divides the steaks between corn-fed, grass-fed and American Kobe beef. There are seven choices of sauces (served on the side, they're not too overwhelming) and "toppers" including a fried egg, roasted bone marrow, foie gras, fried sweetbreads or a lobster tail. There are also a variety of sides.

Our waiter explained the difference between grass- and corn-fed beef and also helped us with our sauce selections. Turns out grass-fed beef is a bit leaner than corn-fed, and that corn-fed is what most Americans are used to eating. Who knew? We also ordered cauliflower gratin and sautéed exotic mushrooms (a nice variety of sizes and flavors) for sides.

My grass-fed filet cut was very tender and clean-tasting, with an earthy flavor and a thick, almost custard-like texture. The herbed truffle aioli was an ideal accompaniment, but I liked the steak by itself, too. Tasting it alongside Amy's corn-fed ribeye cut, which was noticeably more fatty but equally delicious, was a treat for the taste buds. The salsa verde sauce (a light mixture of olive oil, parsley, cilantro and maybe a touch of garlic) accompanied its heavier flavor with a light, bright edge.

For dessert we had chocolate caramel fondue with banana fritters (crisp/moist/perfect) and rice crispy treats with peanuts; and the bourbon crème brulee, which had salt in its caramelized top—and loved every bite.

Marin Joe's

1585 Casa Buena Drive
Corte Madera
(415) 924-2081
www.marinjoesrestaurant.com

Italian Cuisine
Dinner nightly, lunch Mon.-Fri.
Entrées: \$10.75-\$32.50
Full bar, good wine list

Many restaurants lately are focusing on American classics. I think that's a great idea, since it emphasizes fond memories and comfort food. Marin Joe's has a bit of a head start on the newbies, though. It's been serving up classic Italian American fare since the 1950s and has worked hard (and very successfully) at keeping that nostalgic feeling alive. With several Bay Area locations, it certainly has a recipe for success.

We visited on a Monday, and the joint was jumpin'. People of all ages filled it with smiles and chatter. The main dining room has an open kitchen and casual feeling. Brennen and I sat in the lounge, complete with black leather seats, stone walls, a fireplace, a large, full bar with plenty of seating and a grand piano bar.

Our meal started with an appetizer of meat ravioli, smothered in a tomato sauce that had a tiny touch of cream, fresh diced tomatoes, Italian herbs, fresh pepper and was topped with parmesan cheese. It bursted with homemade, Italian flavor. We also tried the housemade onion rings, which came in a large pile, lightly battered and served hot. They were sweet, fresh and delicious.

You can't really pass up a Caesar salad tossed at the table—so we didn't. Each is made to order, with the dressing from scratch. The Romaine leaves are chopped and the salad was rich with cheese, garlic and parmesan croutons.

To go with dinner, I ordered a glass of Zinfandel, and the server suggested the Pezzi King Old Vine (peppery, dark fruit).

We must have been on a seafood kick, because for entrées, I chose the petrale sole doré and Brennen ordered mesquite smoked trout. You can decide on the sides: steamed vegetables and fries or baked red potatoes, or ravioli or spaghetti (with meat sauce, though substitute sauces are available for a bit extra). Brennen took it a step further and ordered gnocchi with pesto sauce as his side (moist, creamy, garlicky, yum).

The sole was exactly as I'd pictured. Absolutely perfect, it was a large portion and smothered in the lemon, butter white wine doré sauce—very tender and enjoyable.

The smoked trout is an excellent choice for someone looking for a lighter dish. Very fresh and tender, its mellow, natural flavor was its highlight. Both fish dishes came with tartar sauce (I don't personally use it; I feel like it hides the flavor too much), but when I tasted it, I was pleasantly surprised. It wasn't heavy or thick, but rather creamy with a generous amount of fresh chopped onions.

For dessert, we enjoyed coffee, tiramisu and some apple pie. The tiramisu was light and creamy and went perfectly with the coffee. The apple pie was fresh made with cinnamon, and not overly sweetened one bit (just the way I like it).

Julie Fadda is editor of NorthBay biz magazine. She lives in Santa Rosa with her two boys, Tony and Joe.

