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THE RATTLESNAKE CLUB: TRIUMPHANT DENVER TRIO

By COLMAN ANDREWS

If there's any justice in the culinary world, then the most talked-about new restaurant in America in the next few months is going to be the Rattlesnake Club, which opened to the public last Wednesday in a handsome new retail complex fashioned out of an 1850s-vintage brewery (the Tivoli by name) in the mile-high and currently snow-cloaked city of Denver.

The Rattlesnake is a collaboration between three young, energetic, very savvy food people—Denver restaurateur Bevans Brannham, chef Jimmy Schmidt (late of the London Chop House in Detroit), and L.A.'s own Michael McCarty, proprietor of Michael's in Santa Monica. And based on a look around the place, I'd say that all three partners are in top form individually—and that they make a most impressive team.

The food at the Rattlesnake Club is Schmidt's, period. That means that it isn't coolly Californian or pan-culturally New Yorkish or self-consciously back-to-the-roots American or even post-modernly Southwestern in style. Instead, it is a little bit of all of the above plus a lot of what I can only describe as Schmidt's own contemporary re-

reading of basic Yankee grill-room cooking. Thus, the daily selection might include such luncheon dishes as a salad of Belgian endive, chayote, and fresh peppers; duck hash with scallions and corn tortillas; swordfish with a compound butter of olives, anchovies, and capers; lamb chili with *chevre*-cream and a dice of avocado and papaya (even common-sense chefs have to have a little fun *sometimes*); and a hamburger served with corn and jalapeno compote and taro (!) chips.

Dinner choices might be such as *escabeche* of clams and mussels; sauteed *foie gras* salad with ginger; cream of artichoke soup with hazelnuts and cumin; escalope of salmon with grapefruit and lemon balm; and smoked pork chops with pecan pancakes—plus desserts like bread pudding with bourbon sauce and blinis stuffed with chocolate velvet ice cream. Average dinner check for two should be around \$50 without alcohol—and the excellent wine list, meticulously chosen by Philip Reich of Michael's, is fairly priced.

But there is much more to the Rattlesnake Club than food and drink: The place looks and feels just plain *wonderful*. It is one of the most exciting pieces of restaurant design I've ever seen—a big, raucous, glamorous yet comfortable space that refers to New York grandeur and L.A. spareness and new-classical architectural detailing but that still maintains some sort of elusively "Western" identity.

The restaurant exists on three levels, connected by a glass-enclosed elevator. The bar is downstairs, with an informal open kitchen to serve such fare as lamb tartar, spiced crab fritters, and wild mushroom and Roquefort pizza. The walls have been left as they were, showing random patches of 125-year-old brick, thick plaster, and the ghosts of paint in half a dozen colors. On the walls are absolutely top-of-the-line new paintings and graphics by artists like Hockney, Diebenkorn, Stella. This is contemporary restaurant imagination as big as all outdoors. □