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The Kitchen

★★★

1039 Pearl St., Boulder, 303-544-5973, www.thekitchencafe.com

Recommended Dishes *Gnocchi with ragu, Burrata and prosciutto flatbread, sausage strata, pan-roasted pork loin*

Then

Community has always been a central philosophy of the Kitchen. In 2004, when the farm-to-table bistro opened in Boulder, diners could drop in and see a farmer delivering eggs or pick up the menu and find a product list that looked like a community-supported agriculture (CSA) order form. Each of the dishes was chock-full of ingredients from nearby farms and ranches. The mission—to serve simple, thoughtfully crafted dishes of local ingredients—was noble, and before long the Kitchen received ink in publications like *Food & Wine* and the *New York Times*. As Boulderites and out-of-towners packed the tables,

the Pearl Street eatery became the kind of spot where you expected long waits—or where you reserved a table days in advance. But that was not owners Hugo Matheson and Kimbal Musk's original plan.

Now

Community is not built on long waits or special-occasion dinners. It's fashioned around easy, regularly shared meals. So when the Kitchen turned five this spring, it celebrated with a reorganization that prioritized everyday eating. A few entrées were removed from the menu to make room for more affordable, small plates. The two-tops near the bar were traded out for shared six-

seaters. A midafternoon happy hour, officially dubbed "community hour," was added to offer food and drink specials. Breakfast was axed, but brunch remains.

Now you can go to the Kitchen to dine on the bistro's characteristically elegant and rustic fare (sautéed kale and gnocchi with a hearty meat ragu, for example), but the dining experience is more natural—more organic, if you will. Many diners still order individual entrées like meaty pork tenderloin with fingerling potatoes and braised peaches, but they can also make a satisfying meal of small plates. Share dishes such as the hearty chickpeas spiced with cumin and sweetened with carrots and tomatoes, broth-bathed mussels, a salad of peppery greens tossed with goat cheese and pecans, and thick, hand-cut prosciutto with white beans, and there will be plenty for two to *ohhh* and *ahhh* over. Even better: When the bill rings up at about \$20 each, you may consider coming back the following week.

The Kitchen offers even more affordable deals at weekend brunch, lunch, and community hour (3 to 5:30 p.m.), at which \$20 buys you an entrée and drink, and maybe even dessert. And the dishes—cozy sausage strata, rustic Burrata and prosciutto flatbread, and silky chocolate mousse—are just as layered and locally focused as those served during the evening.

With these low prices, you can forgive the Kitchen's lackadaisical service. But when you drop \$120 on a more traditional dinner for two, and your server forgets to put in your order and then brings the wrong dessert—both of which happened to us—you feel shortchanged. The same is true when no one greets you when you enter the restaurant, or when you have to flag down your server because she rarely returns to your table. In those moments, the Kitchen's community philosophy falls victim to an overly relaxed—almost sloppy—ambiance.

But grab a seat at the bar, where you'll always have the bartender's attention, and order a few eats and a heady Belgian brew like an Orval Trappist Ale. (The Kitchen now carries the lengthy list of international beers from its sister restaurant, the Kitchen [Upstairs].) From your perch, you'll look out on a restaurant that every night of the week is abuzz with diners, and you'll realize that the Kitchen's distracted service and sometimes high pricing (if you order a conventional dinner) are small imperfections in a restaurant that, in many ways, embodies Boulder. —KAZIA JANKOWSKI