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## BALBOA

*A formidable steakhouse for a new generation is a welcome addition to Sunset Boulevard*

by Brad A. Johnson    photography by Jessica Boone

The conversation among three men and a woman at the table to my left has skipped from mortgage rates to porn to tattoos. A guy with shaggy sun-streaked hair and a vintage red T-shirt shrunk to show off his washboard abs has now gotten up from his seat and is leaning across the table so his buddies can get a closer look at his newest tattoo. From where I'm sitting, and I am very close, I can't quite tell which of his tattoos has so captivated everyone's attention. Both of his arms are completely gilded with ink.

Just as I'm about to lean over to get a better look, a waiter dressed in a white butcher's coat arrives pushing the Caesar cart, and suddenly their rapt attention shifts to garlic. "Lots of garlic," says one. "No, no, not too much, I have a date tomorrow," says another. "I'll make it both ways," the waiter responds, genuinely happy to comply.

About that time, my waiter arrives and sets before me a beautiful slab of meat branded with the stripes of a red-hot grill along with a rectangular pewter dish of steaming asparagus trees.

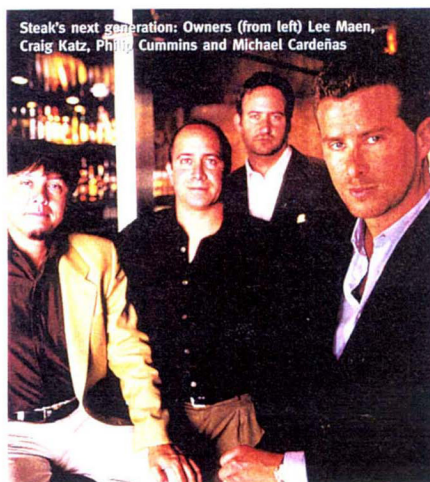
I have ordered my meat, as usual, medium-rare, but I forgot to request that it be ever-so-slightly charred, as that's what creates the richest, most satisfying flavor. Thankfully chef Gabriel Morales already knows this, as my steak couldn't be more perfect. With one bite, I instantly know this is a serious steakhouse dedicated to serving the best meat available—and here is a chef who knows how to cook meat properly.

I grew up on a 6,000-acre Texas cattle ranch where my family raised free-range beef: Black Angus, Red Angus, Brahman, Brangus, Hereford, Italian Chianina, French Charolais, even German Gelbvieh. And I've spent a good portion of my life eating in steakhouses around the country: The Palm, Mortons, Del Frisco's, Cene & Georgetti, Ruth's Chris, Peter Luger and countless others whose names steak lovers would surely recognize. Balboa's meat is as good as any of those classic temples to beef.

But clearly this isn't an ordinary steakhouse, and that's the point. This is a thoroughly exciting restaurant with a wonderfully modern vibe. The owners, who also own Sushi Roku, hadn't planned to open a steakhouse or even to open a restaurant in the Grafton hotel. For more than a year they'd been building a new Japanese restaurant, Katana, just across Sunset Boulevard from Balboa when legal disputes between the Grafton's intended occupant and the Mondrian Hotel next door left the Grafton in a pickle. A new restaurant team had to be found. Long story short, the Roku team won the bid. (Katana should be open by press time.)



Steakhouse décor reinvented



Steak's next generation: Owners (from left) Lee Maen, Craig Katz, Phil Cummins and Michael Cardenas

In a way, Balboa looks more like a trendy sushi bar than a steakhouse—we've seen Modernist design in a sushi environment before, but never in a steakhouse. This isn't a grand old room awash with beely leather booths and business suits. It is a tony shui matchbox partitioned by South Carolina twigs and psychedelic glass, with walls of marble, glass panels and camel brown leather squares. A tall leggy hostess, possibly wearing a leather mini, will whisk you through the darkness to your table the moment you arrive. Your eyes will need a minute to adjust, then no sooner than you're seated one of those friendly waiters in butcher coats comes bearing hand-forged Sabatier Laguiole knives, the kind which sell in fine gourmet shops for \$50 apiece, letting you know you really do want to order meat.

"The times have changed," says Lee Maen, one of Balboa's four owners. Maen used to own a nightclub, which for a time was great, he says, because it allowed him to socialize with friends and always be the host of the party. But his friends, like most people whose careers eventually take off, outgrew the nightclub scene and needed a new place to hang.

"All of our friends, mostly in their 30s like us, are becoming the players in this town—agents, managers, producers. The classic steakhouses around here were their parents' steakhouses. This new generation needed one of their own, a place they could call home, where they could hang out with friends and entertain clients," Lee says.

All the elements of a great steakhouse are here: shrimp the size of Chihuahuas served with horseradish cocktail sauce; sweet, hefty crab cakes made from Maryland blue crabs; a softball-sized wedge of iceberg lettuce with thick, tangy Maytag blue cheese dressing; Caesars made to order tableside; excellent cheesecake (save room); fine wines and strong, dry Martinis.

The steaks really are superb, despite the fact that the 1,800°F grill doesn't use wood. Most of Balboa's steaks are dry-aged for 28 days, the very best of which is the *Bone-In Kansas City Filet* (\$34). Normally, I prefer a rib-eye because it is the fattiest, most flavorful cut, but the *Rib-Eye* here (\$28) can occasionally taste overly ripe (aside from being cut too thin). The *New York Strip* (\$38) benefits from 35 days of dry-aging. (Dry-aging, by the way, is the costly process of letting meat sit, unwrapped, usually in large primal cuts, not individual steaks, with air circulating around it. Essentially this lets the meat biodegrade in controlled refrigerated conditions causing muscle tissue to break down and become tender. It also creates a much stronger, some say gamy, taste.) Without dry-aging, a