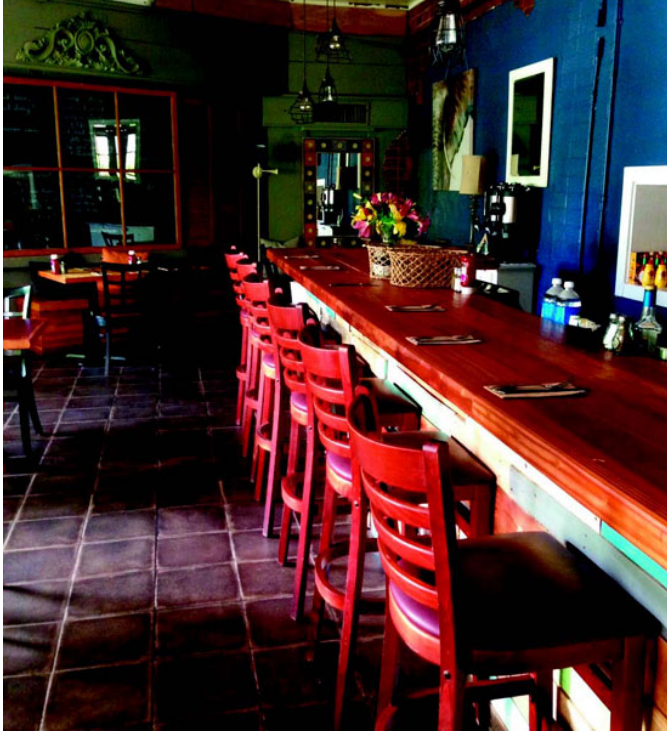


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## Claim Your Space in Lafayette's Latest Hideout

By A.K. Carroll



Photos A.K. Carroll

"You know that space you walked into as a kid? The place you took all your favorite things and made into your own?" J.B. Balingit asks as he gestures over a plate of bright orange sweet potato fries. He sits across from me at a patio table outside of the Hideout Kitchen & Cafe on a Wednesday afternoon, the sun scarcely slipping through tree branches and umbrellas. "That's the sort of place I had in mind."

I take a bite of a thick crisp tuna melt, juicy tomatoes and fresh cucumbers enclosed between a layer of cheese and a layer of tuna salad, all of it sandwiched in panini-pressed slices of Boudin sourdough. "The tuna melt is from Little Star," says Balingit. "But the curry wrap is an original."

Much like the cafe's decor, Hideout's menus are an eclectic array of favorites, from a waffle sandwich stuffed with country-fried steak and doused in syrup and gravy to the Lafayette salad loaded with summer berries, cucumbers and crushed almonds, to a bowl of clams and mussels soaking in a white wine butter sauce. Compiled and executed by Balingit himself, the menu reflects a range of culinary influences.

Born in Los Angeles and raised by Filipino parents, Balingit grew up immersed in the bold sauces and dark, rich flavors of Spanish and Filipino-influenced dishes. At age 10 his family moved to the Philippines, where his parents inherited his grandmother's restaurant and catering company. "I grew up eating what was available," says Balingit, who became accustomed to having food grown within walking distance of his family's kitchen, much of it in his own backyard. Farm-to-table wasn't a concept - it was the only way of eating.

Balingit didn't officially enter the culinary scene until moving back to California. After filling out 87 job applications, he started as a busboy at Fresh Choice, a humbling experience for the ambitious 19-year-old. "I wasn't afraid of hard work," says Balingit, who learned the importance of good service as he progressed from busboy to food runner to server to line cook, and finally to sous chef, working at Chevys (Pleasant Hill), Little Star Cafe (Walnut Creek), and Pasta Pomodoro (Pleasant Hill) before making it to the Sausalito Yacht Club, where he began honing his culinary skills.

Balingit later spent valuable time working in San Francisco's Brickhouse Café and brainstorming with local chefs, but his strongest culinary ties were back in the East Bay with John, Dave, and Chris Marcovici, owners of Jack's Restaurant and Bar (Pleasant Hill). "The only reason I was confident enough to open this place were the skills they gave me," says Balingit of his experience as Jack's sous chef and director of culinary operations.

"What it is now is exactly how I envisioned it when I drove into the parking lot the first time." Though the name was a while coming, the Hideout has become just that - a place where Balingit has brought many of his favorite things, including a collection of old Hangar One bottles, mix and match silverware, reclaimed wood, and handmade art installations. "Every piece of furniture has a story," he says.

The interior of the restaurant resembles a well-swept barn with a flair of rustic charm from exposed brick, distressed wood, repurposed fruit crates, and caged light fixtures. Sturdy tables with

mismatched antique chairs seat 2-6 guests, a bar is lined with high-backed seats and a "wine room" can hold parties of 8-10. The space is small, but not crowded, with a wall of floor-to-ceiling windows that open to the outdoor patio and let in light.

The Hideout isn't a place to visit if you have a movie to catch or a deadline to meet. The service is slow, but sincere, and for the most part that's by design. It may be a generous 20 minutes between your heirloom tomato bruschetta and bacon-sage brussel sprouts, and your waiter may not ask after you often, but when he does he will really mean it. The spot is better suited for a leisurely evening than a power lunch, with a minimal kitchen staff putting things together plate-by-plate.

Lunch, dinner, and weekend brunch menus are seasonally influenced and extensive in their offerings. With an array of sandwiches and wraps, salads, pastas, and entrees that range from fried chicken and biscuits to rack of lamb served with sweet sautéed kale, you're almost certain to find something that suits your palate. Just be sure to order enough wine to sip as you await its arrival.

Bring a book, bring a friend, bring whatever it is that will make the Hideout feel like home and spend some time making this space your space, as you nibble and nosh through a meal.

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