

San Diego Reader

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"I starred in *Star Trek*, you don't recognize me?" Bill looks at our blank faces. We don't recognize him. "Okay, so not exactly a starring role. I'm the guy in the gray jumpsuit with a hard hat. Kirk rides a bike past me. Two full seconds on-screen!" So he was once an extra. But what's true for sure is that he's a star here at this half-underground place called Indigo-pretty much everybody seems to have come tonight because Bill the bartender is fun company. Which is good, because it's Saturday, the loneliest night of the week, as the song says, in this little Cortez Hill place with a few tables outside, a crowd of blue booths inside, and a full drinks bar by the door. That's where a clump of us sit like *Lost* survivors, huddling from the emptiness outside. The walls are blue, with low white acoustic tile ceiling and pictures of jazz greats, from W.C. Handy to Satchmo. Jazz plays on the sound system.

"Something to drink?" Bill asks. He has on offer a bunch of beers from New Orleans, like Dixie Jazz Amber Light. Except that one's \$4.50 and Miller High Life is \$2.75. No Contest. So, I slurp my Miller and lean over the menu. We're looking at around ten bucks a plate, unless you go for New Orleans specialties like "shrimp-stuffed double-cut grilled pork chop with etouffee sauce and macaroni and cheese." Man, heart attack on a plate. That's \$18.99. At the other end of the price scale, breakfast starts at \$2.79 for two eggs and cheese on an English muffin, or \$4.99 for scrambled eggs, two bacon, toast, and hashbrowns. Man, wish it was morning.

"Hey, here comes Robert," says Bill. "He's with the symphony orchestra. We get half the symphony here when they're rehearsing." Two gents come and settle into a booth. Bill already knows Robert's cocktail. "Hey, here's the Seacrests," says Bill now, looking out the window. This couple, Joshua and Julia, come in with Joshua's Navy buddy Stewie. They live farther up Cortez Hill. "We come here two, three times a week," says Joshua. "It's Bill. He makes it like our family living room." "And hey, here's Jack," says Bill.

Jack comes in and sits next to me. He's a big, solid guy, just retired from the Marines after 25 years. He's here for a New York steak and a Vesper. (The cocktail James Bond named after the female agent he met in *Casino Royale*. It's three parts gin, one part vodka, and a half of Kina Lillet-the French wine-and-quinine aperitif. Around six bucks, Jack says.) I see his steak comes topped with Gorgonzola butter and veggies and "garlic and goat cheese mashed potatoes." Costs \$16.99. "Probably pay 30, 40 bucks for this down in the Gaslamp," says Jack.

So far, I've got to salads and soups. Hmm...Tiffany's Salad sounds possible: grilled chicken on a bed of mixed greens, plus cranberries, golden raisins, feta and sesame dressing...a good deal at \$8.99 (it's \$6.99 without the meat, \$10.99 with shrimp). And in the wraps section, everybody says the roasted vegetable with herbed goat cheese, spinach, and ranch in a wheat Tortilla (\$7.99) is great. But I'm thinking gumbo, or jambalaya, since this is supposed to be N'awlins cooking here. Bubba Blues Jambalaya has andouille sausage, chicken, and onions with a tomato base over rice for \$9.99. Then they

have Creole gumbo, with chicken it's \$10.99, with rock shrimp \$11.99. "So, uh, what's the difference between jambalaya and gumbo?" I ask Bill. "Gumbo has okra," he says. Of course, now I remember our neighbor Linda-the-chef telling me, "Okra's an African plant. Ethiopian slaves brought it to America. It's also very gummy in texture and adds a kind of eggplant, asparagus flavor." Hey, gummy---gumbo? Coincidence?

Joshua's talking about ordering red beans and rice with blackened chicken (\$9.99), and Stewie's going for a Cajun cheeseburger (with pepper-jack cheese and chili aioli, \$8.99). Julia orders a California Cobb salad (with grilled chicken, bacon, egg, avocado, diced tomatoes, Gorgonzola, and blue-cheese dressing, \$8.99) Fact is, I've been hankering to try that Dixie Jazz Amber Light, and I'm betting it'd go with something light like a salad with chicken. "Try Tiffany's Salad," says Bill. "Tiffany's one of the owners." Why not? I order that, and the Dixie Jazz Amber Light.

The combo turns out great, even though I'm surrounded by New Yawk steaks to the right and luscious-looking Cajun burgers to the left. My Tiffany comes on a chic square white ceramic plate, a jungle of greens with golden grilled sliced chicken across the top. And sweet, almost oriental tastes, with the cranberries, raisins, feta, and sesame.

A raggedy blues song starts playing. Stewie looks up from his burger. "That's my hometown boy," he says. "Stevie Ray Vaughan. He was from Witchita Falls. Like me." We listen and chew, we few, we lucky, this little warm blob of humanity of Cortez Hill on a Saturday night. I ask Bill, "This what the *Star Trek* set felt like?"