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Thursday Aug 08, 2013 3:19 PM PT

Big Sur Roadhouse serves up flavors of New Orleans

Christine Delsol, Jeanne Cooper, Special to SFGate

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Photo: James Hall, Special To SFGate



The traditional-style gumbo uses Monterey Bay halibut and Dungeness crab in the stock.

Photo: James Hall

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The Big Sur Roadhouse po'boy sliders are filled with fresh sea bass.

Photo: Big Sur Roadhouse Facebook Page

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Chef Matt Glazer won't call the food fusion, but diners can expect the flavors of New Orleans made with fresh Monterey ingredients.

Photo: James Hall

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Another shot of the sleek new interior of the Big Sur Roadhouse.

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Chef Matt Glazer of Big Sur Roadhouse, a Louisiana transplant, came to Big Sur eight years ago, working at Esalen before becoming general manager at the Big Sur Bakery, where he learned how to source quality ingredients locally.

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If you can imagine a New Orleans in summer without the humidity, a steaming bowl of gumbo or a dainty po' boy in front of you, and redwoods everywhere you look, you'd have something like the Big Sur Roadhouse.

Except you wouldn't be in Big Sur.

And the po' boy wouldn't be a dainty slider size filled with fresh sea bass , and the gumbo wouldn't have a suggestion of Monterey Bay halibut and Dungeness crab in the stock.

Better paving on Highway 1 and a couple of astronomically expensive hotels aside, Big Sur hasn't changed much since Henry Miller and Jack Kerouac found respite here. Case in point: The Big Sur Roadhouse is the first restaurant to open in Big Sur in a decade.

Although it replaces a restaurant by the same name that closed about a year and a half ago, the name is about the only thing it has in common with its predecessor. A top-to-bottom redesign jettisoned the dark redwood model while staying true to Big Sur's atmosphere. The contemporary geometric interior features picture windows facing Highway 1 and fixtures crafted by local artisans from recycled materials, while the exterior offers two patios and a lounge area with sleek couches set among native plants: a Beat-era hangout pad for the modern age.

And then there's the food. Chef Matt Glazer, a Louisiana transplant, came to Big Sur eight years ago, working at Esalen before becoming general manager at the Big Sur Bakery, where he learned how to source quality ingredients locally. (He also brought on Brandon Esons from the Bakery as sous chef.) About to marry a local woman, he says opening the restaurant was his way of laying down roots in Big Sur.

"It was either going to be bringing a little of Big Sur to New Orleans, or New Orleans to Big Sur," he said. "That's how we came up with NO BS: the New Orleans-Big Sur connection. So it's all about taking the local ingredients and giving them a New Orleans flair. I hate the word fusion — we're not fusion, but it's the local flavor such as taking the local king salmon and blackening it with Cajun spices. We'll go as far as the ingredients let us."

We won't call it fusion, but the dinner menu includes blackened Monterey Bay wild king salmon with a succotash of cranberries, corn, beets and arugula, and the creamed spinach is Monterey-grown spinach with crispy onions. A most intriguing side dish is bread pudding with caramelized Cajun trinity (onions, bell peppers and celery) with hot Sicilian sausage and pepatto cheese.

Given its New Orleans inspiration, the menu is surprisingly vegetarian-friendly and gluten-free.

"To consciously leave out a ham shank where I otherwise would have used it, to keep something vegetarian, or to make really great vegetarian options, like red beans and rice and Portobello mushroom, and not have them be "alternatives" — that's been a really cool challenge. We don't have to change a lot of stuff to accommodate [special diets] on the menu because it's already built in and it's just as good." This is a roadhouse only in the sense that it sits by the road. Far from the classic roadhouse designed to pull road-weary travelers in for a bite and a drink before moving on, never to be seen again, Glazer's restaurant is aimed at local tastes and aims to attract repeat business.

"It's a place to pull off the road and eat, and it's also a place to come back to," he said. "We want to be Big Sur's living room, and place to hang out and comfortably show up, or comfortably be."

Here's a big part of the comfort: In another departure from Big Sur tradition, the Roadhouse is open all day, seven days a week, serving three meals a day. You can casually stop by for coffee, wine or a snack, or make reservations for a full meal. Even in that nether world between lunch and dinner, small bites are available; the Southern-fried chicken lollipops are already famous.

"In Big Sur it's tough between those mealtimes to find something to eat. We can offer a small bite right off the bat, so it's a win if you have to wait a bit for your table — you can have wine by the fireplace and a bite to eat."

The Big Sur Roadhouse is 26 miles south of Carmel, between the River Inn and Big Sur Bakery, at 47080 Highway 1, Big Sur. (831) 667-2370, www.glenoaksbigsur.com/roadhouse.html. Open 7:30 a.m. to 9 p.m. daily. The restaurant seats 60 inside and 110 total, including outside tables and couches.