



IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD Owners Stephanie Bonin and Keith Arnold got it right when they opened Duo in East Highland. With Executive Chef John Broening at the helm, the comfortably rustic restaurant immediately became a gathering place for friends and neighbors.

Just Duo It

BY ELISABETH TRUE

Duo

★★★

2413 W. 32nd Ave.

303-477-4141

www.duodenver.com

THE DRAW

A restaurant that draws you in and holds you close.

THE DRAWBACK

Occasional inconsistency.

DON'T MISS

New York strip, half chicken, sticky toffee pudding.

VEGETARIAN OPTIONS

Mushroom ravioli, warm leek salad.

DUO, YOU COULD SAY, is the ultimate neighborhood restaurant. A meal here is comfortable and relaxed, a blend of rustic dishes, mismatched cloth napkins, exposed brick walls, and shabby-chic windowpanes strung together as a playful divider between bar and dining room. Coffee-shop banter—dialogues about recent art shows, discussions of local politics, recom-

mendations of books read and loved—rises from the 17 wood-topped tables. There's the sense that this is where Highland residents gather and break bread night after night.

Chef John Broening, who lives just a few blocks from the restaurant, cooks a menu that mimics his environment. His food is simple, even lighthearted, but he resists the urge to stack ingredients and create art with a capital A. This is food to relax by, for spending an uncomplicated evening spooning in smooth butternut squash soup, chatting over warm leek salad, and sharing bites of savory mushroom-filled ravioli.

The restaurant strikes such a comfort chord that sometimes it's easy to overlook a misstep: the muttoney lamb shank, a tepid apple tart, a thin vegetable soup. When you love something dearly—when you want it to work—it's easy to forgive and forget food that satiates but doesn't satisfy.

One of those subpar dishes, the salt cod fritters (\$5), tasted predominantly of bland potato filler rather than mild fish—even when dipped in an intense lemon and garlic aioli. Another evening, the duck confit appetizer (\$6) was equally disappointing, especially considering that the same dish at Brasserie Rouge, where John Broening presided before it closed, was a brilliantly executed combination of salty, crackly confit and meltingly tender breast. At Duo, the duck was dry and not at all complemented with parched straw-potato cakes, a shred of mustardy mizuna, and a mere dab of fig compote. I was left to ponder how the same chef could create such a fine dish one place and get it so wrong at another. One glance at the open kitchen sheds some light: Broening was absent from the line.

But when Duo is on form, the food is seriously good. A roasted half chicken (\$16),



THE GREAT STEAK OUT Duo's menu changes seasonally, but if it's available don't miss ordering the juicy New York strip.

served with a side of saffron rice, arrived with a light, crispy golden crust that subtly tasted of the best Southern fried. The New York strip (\$19), cooked to order and pink and tender, had a side of twice-cut golden and crispy oversize potato wedges. One evening when Broening manned the burners, I tempted fate and ordered the confit dish again—the appetizer was excellent, with duck meat so succulent and tender it held its own against the potato cake.

Dinner, even with a slipup or two, is one reason to visit Duo; dessert is another entirely. While many restaurant selections of staid and mediocre cakes and puddings don't warrant a second glance, Duo's are worth every blessed calorie. Diners are encouraged to save room for Pastry Chef Yasmin Lozada-Hissom's creations. Lozada-Hissom is a wizard with cream, butter, and eggs, turning out sweets that are delicious and perfectly orchestrated. Favorites include a delicate honey-glazed apple tart with black currant purée, creamy hand-churned ice creams (coffee is one of the best), and caramelly, sticky toffee pudding.

Pair bites of decadence with sips of strong, French-press coffee poured into mismatched cups and saucers. Contemporary pink-and-silver cups mix with classic bone-thin china (that happens to be sourced from one of the owner's grandmothers, neighborhood garage sales, Ebay, and Craig's List) for an effect that's charming and easy, friendly and communal.

At the end of the night, it's this familiar sense, and the comfort of a neighborhood restaurant done right, that brings you—and everyone else—back to Duo. ▲

ABOUT OUR RATINGS **4 Stars:** Outstanding. One of the very best of its kind. **3 Stars:** Very good. A restaurant you'll want to visit again and again. **2 Stars:** Good. Hardly worth a special trip, but, hey, you gotta eat. **1 Stars:** Fair. An eatery with serious flaws, be it in the quality of the food or the service. Or both. **0 Stars:** Don't bother.

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