

First look: Liberty Kitchen at the Treehouse

By **Greg Morago** Updated 3:33 pm, Thursday, September 15, 2016



IMAGE 19 OF 20

Lance Fegen, a partner, is shown at Liberty Kitchen at the Treehouse, 963 Bunker Hill Rd.

A tree house can be a place of escape, imagination, exclusivity, wonder and fun. All those elements, and more, factor into the newest Liberty Kitchen project from **F.E.E.D. TX Restaurant Group** that is set inside the MetroNational eco-friendly office building called the Treehouse.

Next week Liberty Kitchen at the Treehouse – the fifth restaurant under the Liberty Kitchen brand – opens at 963 Bunker Hill in Memorial City. Diners eager to see the newest Liberty baby will be treated to a new menu from executive chef Travis Lenig (who guided the kitchens at **Liberty Kitchen**



& Oyster Bar in the Heights and Liberty Kitchen & Oysterette in River Oaks) and a cleverly designed, double-height space from F.E.E.D. TX partner Carl Eaves. The Treehouse partners have not set an official opening date but are estimating that during the week of Sept. 19 the restaurant will begin serving customers.

Even as it waits for permits, the restaurant is ready to dazzle. Customers entering the Treehouse will first see an intimate cocktail bar that will serve

drinks to those waiting for tables among the lounge-y nooks at the entryway. Beyond the entrance is an open dining area backed by a long, snaking bar/counter where guests can dine and drink facing the kitchen operations. (More about that kitchen in a minute.) To the left of the entry is a series of generous booths (accessible on two sides) perfect for larger parties. Another dining room follows that and then leads to a generous patio which won't be ready for another month but promises to be one of the fall's great hangout places. There is mezzanine level, which Eaves is calling the "tree den" which can be a space for dining overflow or for private events.

Liberty Kitchen fans will recognize design elements from the various restaurants at play here. Familiar are the chandeliers, the Kelly green stools, the "Yeehaw" wallpaper (look closely and you can make out cowboys, oil derricks and football helmets), a vaguely seaside color palette, custom lighting fixtures, homey tchotchkes, fine photography and thrift store art. There's an old vs. new/luxe vs. shabby-chic aesthetic at work. Some wall expanses are covered in reclaimed pine from a cotton factory on the Ship Channel, while other surfaces are clad in antique siding from Victorian homes in the Heights. And the Art Guys' Jack Massing is represented in another expansive piece made with rulers.

F.E.E.D. TX partner and culinary director Lance Fegen has worked with Lenig to create another substantial menu (Liberty menus are always extensive) pumped with Liberty signatures and some new blood.

There are well-loved Liberty signatures on the menu, such as queso; deviled eggs; oysters on the half shell; a Hawaiian poke menu; gumbo; wedge salad; macaroni and cheese iterations; and a classic burger.

But there's also a wealth of new ideas. And a new plaything in the kitchen: a 14-foot-long wood-burning grill stoked with oak and hickory. Lenig will employ that grill for expanded fish and chops offerings (there's more meat and more seafood on the menu), as well as new grilled oyster selections including oysters with bacon jam and butter; with aji pique salsa and chorizo oil; and with a new Liberty Kitchen "Freedom Stings" hot sauce and butter.

Other new dishes: "Lance's Loaded Hushpuppies" with chopped brats, cherry peppers, queso, bacon jam and hot sauce; fried shrimp and pork belly carnitas served with tortillas and fries; Spaghetti with shrimp and clams; chicken cacciatore; coq au vin; lamb cheeseburger; and a pork belly BLT that might be the most expensive BLT you've ever had (priced at \$18.50) but features a half pound of dry-cured heritage bacon.

A la carte meat "samplers" can be ordered in singles, doubles or the whole array, which includes chorizo served with salsa verde; pork belly with Chinese duck sauce; Italian sausage with cherry peppers; morcilla (blood sausage) served with aji pique; and beer brats served with ballpark mustard. Two interesting additions are individual Dutch oven dishes cooked over coals: Cazuela of pork sholder, chorizo and octopus; and chicken with andouille sausage, red beans and Carolina Gold rice.

The Treehouse was designed, in part, to meet the needs of the Memorial neighborhood, which means a lot of family dining with parties of four, six, and eight, said F.E.E.D. TX partner Will Davis. Lenig says he feels particularly at home: he grew up in Memorial, attended Memorial High School and has family living in the neighborhood.

The 5,750-square-foot restaurant's welcome casualness, however, belies the work that went into the project. "The space was designed to fit into the building. It took a lot of work," Davis said. "This is, mechanically, one of the most sophisticated buildings in Houston."

Indeed, the MetroNational Treehouse has the distinction of being a LEED Platinum certified building; it boasts geothermal cooling and heating; a green roof with solar panels; rainwater collection; and a wind turbine and rooftop garden. The Treehouse was designed as a showroom for new and future developments by MetroNational, the company that owns Memorial City Mall and much of the land around it.

Those who follow the Houston dining scene will recognize the Treehouse as the location of a

restaurant that Jonathan Levine of Jonathan's the Rub was developing. But in September 2014 Levine and MetroNational parted ways and the second Jonathan's the Rub was never realized. The space was in brief restaurant limbo until F.E.E.D. TX announced three months later that it would be putting one of its signature Liberty Kitchen restaurants in the ground-floor space. But that project also was delayed by the split between F.E.E.D. TX and Lee Ellis, one of the group's principal founders. Ellis later went on to create Cherry Pie Hospitality which now owns and operates a number of restaurant projects including State Fare and the new Pi Pizza.

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