

MONTEREY COUNTY WEEKLY

New chef, new era for food at Peter B's, Portola and Jacks.

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The rich and delicious po'boy, up close and personal

Danny Abbruzzese is one of those guys who's been a lot of places.

He was born in Brooklyn and still retains much of its native charisma and cadence.

He grew up in the South, in Kentucky and Mississippi and other parts of the Appalachian region.

At different moments in his career he has helped open or revamp 14 restaurants—from Birmingham, Alabama to Vail, Colorado to Flagstaff, Arizona—over the course of 20 years.

He started his local chapter after a friend brought him along to help **Cal Stamenov** at the Masters of Food & Wine at Highlands Inn (which preceded Pebble Beach Food & Wine).

After that impromptu tryout, Stamenov hired him to help launch **Bernardus**.

Abbruzzese shrugs.

"I guess I'm easy to get along with and I work hard," he says. "I'm a kitchen guy."

Most recently he ran a massive and often overlooked operation at **Asilomar Conference Grounds**.

The sheer joy expressed by picky groups like the annual **Ecological Farming Association** attendees testifies to his ability to source and execute great grub.

Given all those places he's been, it's something special to see he's found a place that feels like home.

Portola Hotel allows him to flex his casual sensibilities at **Peter B's Brew Pub** (649-2699) and pursue what he calls "his first true love," fine dining, at next door **Jacks Restaurant** (649-2698).

On a recent visit, he clearly enjoyed showcasing his "Bamma Po' Boy" (\$14), an expertly Bayou-spiced, breaded and fried layer of big shrimp between soft roll that hints at his experience running a farm-to-fryer po' boy joint outside Montgomery, Alabama.

The sandwich that somehow topped it: His take on a Cuban, with tender brisket instead of pork, with caramelized onions, baby Swiss, dijonaise and well-portioned pickles on a **Lafayette Bakery** ciabatta roll that gives just the right amount of resistance.

Details like the Lafayette breads help make the difference: guajillo chile in the chicken quesadilla (\$10); house triple stout barbecue sauce on the backyard burger with bacon and onion rings (\$16); the lingonberry gravy over the Swedish meatballs (\$14).

I also liked the combination of sweet corn, chipotle aioli and salsa fresca on the sizable mahi mahi tacos (\$14); on the menu they celebrate the fact mahi is "the most sustainable tuna in the sea," a reminder of Portola's green pioneering among hotels and their dedicated **Seafood Watch** participation. (The fish was a little dry, which made the aioli and lime wedges handy; there are also Oaxacan chicken and carnitas options.)

Two other cheesy standouts from two visits: The crispy cheese curds (\$8), now served with a spicier garlic aioli that cuts the rich fattiness wonderfully; and the open-face heirloom tomato melt (\$12), with super fresh and super creamy mozzarella, a balsamic dressing and just-right sliced Lafayette country loaf.

The highlight of the robust salads—among five like the **Coke Farm** heirloom tomato (\$14) and the Napa cabbage Chinese chicken (\$15)—has to be the Monterey Louie (\$19): prawns, fresh Dungeness crab, soft-cooked farm egg, red onion, black olive, tomatoes and cucumbers. Yum.

There are other things that make the time and place feel serendipitous for Abbruzzese:

1. The introduction of new Peter B's head brewer **Justin Rivard**: Abbruzzese gets effusive when he talks about how much Rivard has already inspired his food. New beers like a Red Beard's Revenge ginger golden—with spicy on the nose with honey graham cracker quality flowing into smooth ginger flavors—reinforce that enthusiasm.

2. The collaboration and chemistry with Exec Sous Chef **Jae Moon**, who led the recent update to the Jacks menu: "Just a really talented guy," Abbruzzese says.

and

3. The ongoing revitalization of downtown Monterey: Up the block, the arrival of eateries like **PokeLab**, **Revival Ice + Cream**, **Alvarado Ramen** and **Boardwalk Sub Shop** have given the district more buzz than any other time in a generation. The overhauled Conference Center, currently under construction will extend that buzz toward Fisherman's Wharf and the new Dali17 museum, right where Portola and Peter B's await.

On a related note, the lounge at adjoining Jacks is embarking on its own remodel starting later this month, after Concours week.

That will allow them to pour Rivard's beers from taps on site.

In the meantime bartender **Tuyet Vitacca** presides over a superb happy hour: 4-6pm daily, with \$3 bottles of beer, \$4 well drinks and house wines and \$6 barrel-aged cocktails, like the Manhattan with Angel's Envy bourbon, orange bitters, Gran Lusso Vermouth (normally \$12).

Vitacca does a dynamic Jacks punch too, with Southern comfort cherry, amaretto with a blend of cranberry, orange, apple and fresh lime (\$10).

The happy hour standout on the food front: Cuban brisket sliders with baby Swiss and caramelized onions for \$6, mini versions of what Abbruzzese's doing at Peter B's.

The new Jacks burger with bacon, onion jam, portobello, choice of cheese and fries (\$17) is an eye catcher too.

It all makes for a dynamic and seemingly predestined place to be.