

BROTHERS

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You might want a classic, jumbo hot dog topped with sweet relish, onions, yellow mustard and ketchup and served with paprika-dusted fries (\$12). Or you might go for a juicy-enough, bold-flavored duck burger, with ground poultry on a brioche bun with harissa aioli, lettuce, tomato, pickles and red onion (\$15).

The new restaurant idea came after COVID-19 left many of the Hole in the Wall team's friends unemployed.

"We decided it was time to generate more work for others in need," Dzul said. "Sure, it wasn't as easy as we thought it would be. But we worked as hard as we needed to until we finally established it."

The two men aren't actually brothers, though they feel like they are.

"Javier and I grew up together — he is my grandmother's son (uncle) — and we went to the same school in Mexico," Dzul said. "Since we were little, we have done everything together. And 28 years ago, we emigrated together to the United States."

The two bought Hole in the Wall in 2011 after the original owner died unexpectedly. They felt ready

to take on the restaurant themselves after working their way up the ladder.

"We both like the restaurant industry and, like anyone, when you take your first job, we started from the bottom," Dzul said. "We did dishes and moved our way up until we became managers."

Their plan seems to have worked. Hole in the Wall boasts 72 pages of mostly positive and often gushing reviews on Yelp.

Surprisingly, just a few dishes, prepared by Dzul's wife, Pilar, and Brothers Cafe chef Juan Carlos, reflect their Mexican heritage. One standout is chilaquiles, the fried corn tortillas softened under a pool of salsa then crowned with two fried eggs, pico de gallo, avocado, sour cream and salty cotija cheese (\$15, and you can add spicy chorizo for \$5).

But most of the lengthy menu hopscoches across America and unexpected parts of the globe. Why? Why not? I particularly like the home-cooked borscht, a take on the rustic soup stocked with sliced gold and red beets, shredded cabbage, potato chunks and beef short rib in beef broth dolloped with sour cream (\$18). The dish is a longtime favorite at Hole in the Wall.

I also recommend the crispy sizzling schnitzel



JOHN BURGESS / THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

The staff of Brothers Cafe on April 27 in Santa Rosa.

sandwich of chicken breast breaded and fried with a squeeze of fresh lemon and melted pepper Jack cheese, then served with fries, housemade soup or a spring greens salad (\$15). The breasting's crunch stands up well enough even when packed for takeout.

There are only a few local places where you can find a Dutch baby, and this little eatery does a fine job with the big, puffy, German-style pancake showered in caramelized sugar, apples and a hint of nutmeg (\$12). The "baby"

takes about 15 minutes to bake, so I recommend calling ahead for pickup. And really, that caveat holds true for most of the other drive-thru orders unless you want to twiddle your thumbs in the parking lot.

It would take me forever to work my way through the entire multi-page menu covering everything from Cajun-style gumbo brimming with andouille sausage, chicken and crawfish in a smoky roux over rice (\$18) to salmon piccata pan-seared and finished in lemon juice, butter and capers alongside mashed

potatoes and veggies (\$23).

I won't pretend it's all successful, either. French dip is one of my diner acid tests. This model fails because the thinly sliced roast beef has nearly no flavor, and the jus isn't salty, adding no extra dimension except sogginess to the too-soft French roll lined with caramelized onions, grilled mushrooms and Swiss cheese (\$14).

I'll speed away from the coconut curry, too, a mess of penne pasta in a bland coconut milk and cream reduction with carrots, broccoli and tomatoes,

all sprinkled with toasted almond slices and, weirdly, plumped cranberries and Parmesan cheese (\$15).

But for the many fans of Hole in the Wall who live in Santa Rosa or beyond — and certainly, for anyone who likes tasty, family-friendly fare with a bit of culinary attitude — Brothers Cafe is pretty much a guarantee you'll find many dishes to enjoy.

For their success, Dzul and Borges like to give a shoutout to their silent partners, "Miguel (Chable) and Claudio (Can)," and their help through a challenging journey.

"They have been friends of ours all of our lives, from the same hometown," Dzul said. "They have been part of our adventure every step, and we have always counted on them for economic support."

Appropriately, right after Dzul told me that, the background music in the restaurant caught my attention. It was a soul-stirring rendition of "I Did It My Way," sung in Spanish.

Brothers Cafe certainly does do it their way.

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