

Todd A. Price
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Restaurant Review: Lüke

EATS



Lüke

At Lüke, Chef John Besh has built himself a clubhouse. It's a place to kick back and eat well without the fussiness of fine dining. The space in the corner of the new Hilton hotel, which used to be Cobalt before the storm, feels like a cross between a French brasserie and a manly private club. Under a pressed-tin ceiling, old-fashioned belt-driven fans lazily spin. A bronze bull watches diners from above the bar. And hanging below are two polished swords from the days when Besh and the general manager Blake LeMaire were Marines.

Wine is served in squat glasses that can be gripped with a fist. Beer, though, and not wine is the preferred drink, and Lüke has three of its own excellent beers made by a brewer who once worked for Abita.

The least exciting items on the menu are the ones that we've seen before. Trout meunière, stuffed shrimp ("shrimp farci" on the menu) and crabmeat maison are all good, but other good versions can be found just a short walk away. The rich dishes inspired by brasseries and the Alsace region of France are the real heart of Lüke.

Jet-black boudin noir in a papery casing is served with a little brass pot full of sautéed onions, apples and potatoes. The well-made pâtés arrive on wooden cutting boards full of cornichons, fruit chutney, Creole mustard and pickled watermelons. The flamenkuche should not be missed. It's like an Alsatian pizza, which ditches the acidic balance of tomatoes for layers of creamy Mornay sauce topped with cheese and sprinkled with lardons. Listed as an appetizer, with one of Lüke's surprisingly good salads it would make a perfect lunch.

The choucroute maison, with sausage and pork belly over sauerkraut that's more sweet than sour, is a standout dish that captures the essence of Lüke. It's hardy, rooted in the Germanic culture of Alsace and something you're unlikely to find elsewhere in New Orleans. Like many entrees at Lüke, the choucroute is too big and rich for one man to safely finish alone. No problem. That's just a good excuse to bring along some buddies. 333 St. Charles Ave., 378-2840, daily 7 a.m.-11 p.m.

—Todd A. Price