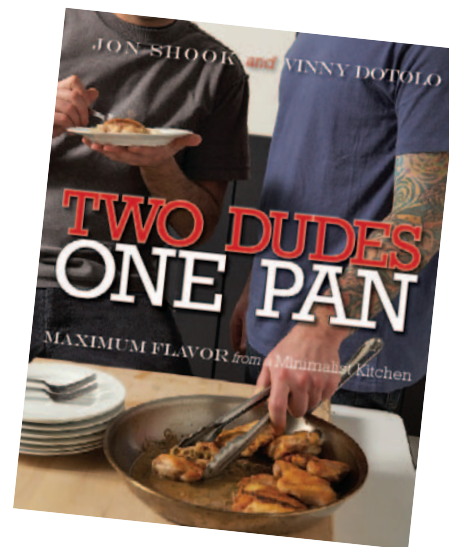


ANIMAL HOUSE

Jon Shook and Vinny Dotolo share their love affair with pork at their new Fairfax restaurant, Animal. BY NORA ZELEVANSKY



former surfer/snowboarder Floridians they're like hyperfunctional Judd Apatow characters minus the slacking. After meeting at the International Culinary School in Fort Lauderdale, the two found strength in numbers, moving in tandem like Hollywood writing partners. After stints at restaurants like Ben Ford's former spot, Chadwick, they launched their catering company. "We were just great line cooks who ultimately march to our own beat," Dotolo explains.

Animal's stripped-down surroundings set the stage for elevated casual chow and a good old time.

Under the Caramelized Productions umbrella, *2 Dudes Catering* spawned countless high-profile gigs, a reality show, and now Animal. In less than five years the company's staff has gone from two to 52. "It's weird to think we're actually in charge," Shook remarks. Dotolo finishes his thought (comments, as usual, volley back and forth): "Sometimes we feel like 16-year-olds getting our licenses for the first time and sometimes it's like we've been doing this forever." Despite success, the guys stay true to their mellow roots. "When you throw parties every night, you don't want to go to a club," Shook confides. "You'd rather smoke a joint on your porch."

And who better to create the most delectable

munchies? Animal is aptly named for the chefs' instinctual approach, but also for the meat-heavy menu. These dudes love pork. "We've sold, like, 11 salads since we opened," laughs Dotolo. "People come here to eat ribs, crab and pork belly together, and steak."

Shook generally handles new clients and management duties, while Dotolo conceives of an arsenal of evolving menu items, which are farmers'-market-fresh and seasonal. "The food is casual," Dotolo explains, "but we're sticklers for freshness, quality, and the final flavor." The menu features steadies like the Bacon Chocolate Bar, Foie Gras Biscuits and Gravy, versions of the Quail Fry (like mini fried chicken), and seasonal favorites like soft-shell crab.

Next, the Animal kingdom is ramping up for winter. "We love dark, rich food," says Dotolo. So expect dishes like lamb shanks and oxtail. The partners also just released their first book, *Two Dudes, One Pan* (Clarkson Potter; \$24.95), which breaks down simple recipes by the type of vessel they're cooked in.

Shook and Dotolo envision myriad possible future projects, from a sandwich shop to a BBQ joint. "LA is really turning it on in the food scene," Dotolo notes. "We're glad to be part of it." *Animal*, 435 North Fairfax Avenue, Los Angeles, 323-782-9225.

KEEP QUIET. Stay very still. Camouflaged in effortlessly chic gear, trek up Fairfax through thick and vast concrete jungle, bypassing the treacherous Grove. Your quarry? You'll catch a glimpse of LA's rarest new *Animal*.

Co-owned by a two-headed monster: Best buds, business partners, and "food dudes" Jon Shook and Vinny Dotolo (of *2 Dudes Catering* on Food Network and local event fame), this newfangled restaurant shifts the city's culinary ecosystem. Calling to mind Hollywood's Hungry Cat (pre-makeover) and Silver Lake's Pho Café, Animal's stripped-down surroundings set the stage for elevated casual chow and a good old time.

Despite Animal's hipster ambience (stark concrete floors, bare white walls, and unadorned wooden tables seating an intimate 45) and unlikely surroundings (unpretentious Canter's Deli on Fairfax), warmth predominates; perhaps it's a by-product of the management's laid-back vibe. Shook and Dotolo didn't necessarily set out to serve traif galore in this heavily Jewish neighborhood. "Fairfax picked us," grins Dotolo through green glasses, tattooed "sleeves" peeking out from cheffy duds. "This felt manageable." Still, the spot has been a veritable zoo since launching.

The duo's Zen attitude, kick-back style, and shared sense of humor is uncharacteristic of the fast-paced, hard-knocks hospitality industry. As

