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Review: Acqua Pazza a nice touch in San Mateo

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Thursday, July 8, 2010

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Soon after we took our seats at Acqua Pazza in downtown San Mateo, a server strode to our table carrying a plate piled with earthy-brown fungi.

They were fresh porcini from Mount Shasta, and he was showing them to promote the night's specials. The chef, he said, would shave the mushrooms into risotto, on filet mignon, over pasta - however we wanted them.

I chose chicken breast, figuring that its mild flavor would highlight the porcini, and was rewarded with a dish (\$18.95) of tender, sauteed breast topped with shavings of the succulent mushrooms.

This celebration of ingredients and exuberant service is the draw at Acqua Pazza, a 2-year-old restaurant run by three brothers from Naples. A love of food and service is palpable; the amiable waiters describe the specials in luscious detail and thick Italian accents, and generously hand out complimentary drinks and desserts. Ingredients are handled well, so they retain their essence.

The two-story corner space gives the restaurant an open feel and provides enough wall space for abstract art pieces. The decor is a bit eclectic, with varying art pieces and light fixtures. The World Cup has brought out strings of mini-soccer balls.

The mix-and-match decor can extend to the preparations, too. Acqua Pazza's beet salad (\$9.95) keeps things simple with fresh, earthy beets and richly flavored arugula in a well-balanced dressing. But the grilled octopus salad (\$9.95), though the octopus was well cooked, was confused: The jumble of corn, peas, cherry tomatoes, lima beans and octopus didn't hang together.

The mussel and clam appetizer (\$12.95), however, is deliciously briny, swimming in a thin broth of cherry tomatoes, garlic, peppers and olive oil - an excellent bread-dipping medium with a touch of heat.

Dinner-size pizzas include the bianca (\$12.95) with white sardines, mozzarella, arugula and fresh tomatoes. The mildly vinegary fish balances the fat of the cheese; the arugula provides a grassy

element.

Much of the menu is taken up with pastas, and all of those we tried were very good, including the incredibly rich strozzapreti (\$12.95), twisted pasta in a cream sauce with peas, mushrooms and sausage, with a suggestion of nutmeg. Calamarata (\$16.95), al dente tubular pasta with calamari, salmon, mussels, clams and shrimp in a slightly spicy tomato sauce, tastes pleasantly of the sea.

Entrees are simple, consisting of meat, poultry or fish with sauteed vegetables - a fine formula when well executed, as it was for a night's special of halibut (\$24.95). This entree, along with the porcini chicken, set expectations that faltered with the veal saltimbocca (\$19.95), which was uninteresting and accompanied by mushy, overcooked vegetables.

An extensive list of local and Italian wines includes well-priced varietals, several wines by the glass and a few half bottles.

If you didn't get enough liquor with your meal, you can always order the sponge cake soaked in rum (\$7), a heady affair topped with a pile of whipped cream. But don't miss the tiramisu (\$6), with a lovely espresso scent and just the right amount of sweetness. It's so light you can't imagine it contains any calories.

While service was always gracious and generally timely, one night it was so slow we stumbled out of the restaurant more than two hours after we sat down. Our waiter apologized with complimentary glasses of Champagne - a touch that made me forgive them immediately.

Acqua pazza

201 E. Third Ave. (near Ellsworth Avenue), San Mateo; (650) 375-0903 or acqua-pazza.com. Lunch 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Monday-Friday; dinner 5-10 p.m. Monday-Friday; lunch and dinner 11:30 a.m.-10 p.m. Saturday-Sunday. Beer and wine. Reservations and credit cards accepted. Street parking, sometimes difficult; paid lots nearby.

Overall Rating: TWO STARS Atmosphere Rating: TWO STARS

Food Rating: TWO STARS Prices \$\$\$

Service Rating: TWO STARS Noise Rating: THREE BELLS

Ratings key

FOUR STARS = Extraordinary; THREE STARS = Excellent; TWO STARS = Good; ONE STAR = Fair; NO STARS = Poor

\$ = Inexpensive: entrees \$10 and under; \$\$ = Moderate: \$11-\$17; \$\$\$ = Expensive: \$18-\$24; \$\$\$\$ = Very Expensive: more than \$25

ONE BELL = Pleasantly quiet (less than 65 decibels); TWO BELLS = Can talk easily (65-70); THREE BELLS = Talking normally gets difficult (70-75); FOUR BELLS = Can talk only in raised voices (75-80); BOMB = Too noisy for normal conversation (80+)

Prices are based on main courses. When entrees fall between these categories, the prices of appetizers help determine the dollar ratings. Chronicle critics make every attempt to remain anonymous. All meals are paid for by The Chronicle. Star ratings are based on a minimum of three visits. Ratings are updated continually based on at least one revisit.

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