

Thursday, February 28, 2008

La Vecchia is back!

La Vecchia Italian Restaurant, a Reno favorite since the days when it occupied a space on West Street (it's at Moana Lane and South Virginia Street now), went through a rough patch after chef Ivano Centemeri and gorgeous, glamorous, Gucci-clad hostess Patricia Zanchetta sold their interest about 18 months ago.

That left chef Alberto Gazzola to run the front and back of the house alone, and that's an almost impossible job in a restaurant that's as big as La Vecchia. But recently, La Vecchia has begun to return to its old form. There's new signage, the interior has been spiffed up and, most important, sous chef Brooke Lampert has come aboard.

Brooke has great credentials, including stints with top luxury hotel groups, and the other day, she and Alberto let me taste a few of the new dishes they're working on. Based on my tasting, I'd say La Vecchia has regained its footing and is as good as ever.

Lunch began with addictive arancini (deep-fried risotto balls) nestled in beef ragu, nicely fresh sashimi-grade tuna draped over greens and finocchio (fennel), and sheep's milk feta crumbled over a stack of eggplant pucks:



A real stunner arrived next: A partitioned dish cradling four different ravioli. Clockwise from upper left: Italian sausage with pumpkin ricotta ragu; Bolognese-style built from prosciutto, veal, pork and chicken; spinach ravioli Fiorentina filled with ricotta and topped with tomato concasse; and, my favorite, blissfully rich lobster ravioli crowned with caviar. Here's my attempt at an artistic shot:



Lunch also featured bucatini all'Amatriciana, one of my favorite Italian dishes. Bucatini is hollow strand pasta; Amatriciana is a spicy sauce traditionally made with tomatoes, onions, red chilis and guanciale (cured hog's jowl). Guanciale isn't readily available in the United States, so Alberto used pancetta, the standard substitute:



Who doesn't love cheese course? I'd have one for breakfast; in fact, I often do, though more modestly than the cheese plate at lunch composed of (clockwise from top) feathery petals of Italian gorgonzola; intensely flavored Humboldt Fog blue cheese from Cypress Grove; pungent taleggio; spongy, salty ricotta salata; a mildly sweet p'tit Basque:



We weren't done yet. Tiramisu and a glossy, upright wedge of flourless chocolate torte appeared (I loved the plating):



Followed by a marvelous trio of cheesecakes (and I'm not typically a cheese cake eater; most are gummy and bland) paired with cocktailettes that featured the cheesecakes' dominant flavors. From left are amaretto cheesecake, blood orange cheesecake and tiramisu cheesecake:



It's not just me singing La Vecchia's praises. My friend Stefan Tscheppe, the operations manager of Perry Creek Winery (great wines; check them out!), said he recently had an excellent lunch at the restaurant. For nearly 200 years, the Tscheppe family, owners of Tscheppe Winery, have made wine in the region where Switzerland, Austria and Italy tumble together, so Stefan knows good Italian food when he eats it.

Sous chef Brooke also has her own personal chef and catering business, The Divine Plate, 560-0890, www.divineplate.com.

La Vecchia is at 3501 S. Virginia St.; call 825-1113

From the blog of Johnathon Wright, RGJ food critic.