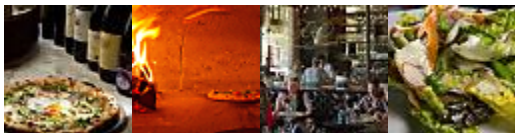


San Francisco Chronicle

Redd Wood review: upscale pizza, with much more

Michael Bauer

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It's interesting how the right talent and a tight concept will turn a fledging space into a hot ticket.

Cantinetta Piero in the Hotel Luca lasted less than three years, even though it had a big budget and was built from the ground up. While the interior was pleasant, the layout was awkward and the Italian food uneven. After one visit, I decided to pass on a review because it didn't seem special and paled next to many of the other restaurants in the Napa Valley.

Last year the hotel was taken over the Auberge group and renamed North Block. Richard Reddington, who had already proved himself at the Auberge resort and as the owner of his own place, Redd, took over the restaurant and converted it into an upscale pizzeria, called Redd Wood.

The interior was changed completely by Erin Martin, who gutted the light walls and finished floors right down to the concrete. Dark wood slats now cover the walls, and the door openings are trimmed in black metal. About the only element recognizable from before is the open kitchen.

The room was also rearranged to include a bar. It's separated by a glass partition and defined by a ceiling punctuated by dozens of single Edison bulbs that resemble stars shining in the night sky, all of which helps make the dining room more intimate and inviting. A room to the side of the kitchen now has a communal table with a chandelier made with long fluorescent light tubes, and doors that open to an outdoor seating area. The only time you think you're in a hotel is when you have to walk across the breezeway to use the bathroom in the lobby.

On the night of our initial visit, that area was closed off because it was booked for a going-away party for Nicolas Fanucci, the French Laundry general manager who was moving to Philadelphia to take over the legendary Le Bec Fin.

We were seated in the 58-seat dining room next to Margrit Mondavi, who said this was her fourth or fifth visit - and the place had been open only about six weeks. She and her late husband, Robert Mondavi, are honored in the restaurant - the back wall of the side room features their Wappo Hill mailbox framed by dozens of wooden squares holding bottles of wine. On other visits we saw other Napa Valley luminaries, showing that this is becoming a local hangout.

The most significant change has been the food from Reddington and Jake Kossmann. Reddington also hired Liza Shaw, former A16 chef, who lends her distinctive touch to the pizzas. Under this dynamic team, the food is no longer just passable - it's superb.

Wood-fired oven

A large gold "Pizzeria" is lettered across the front plate-glass window, but ironically that's not the reason I'd head here. Baked in a wood-fired oven, the pizza has a fine blistered crust, but on one visit the pie lacked flavor and the tomato sauce on top tasted a bit watery. On another visit we had a much better meat pie with asparagus (\$16), prosciutto, red onion, taleggio cheese and an egg in the center.

It could be that my mild disappointment was intensified because everything else is so exceptional, starting with the shaved spring vegetable salad (\$12). Thin ribbons of carrots, radishes and asparagus were tossed with Little Gem leaves, fava beans and sugar snap pods split open to reveal the round peas inside. The elements were brought together by the Green Goddess dressing - creamy, smooth and tangy from anchovy. Another equally fine salad featured roasted beets and bitter greens (\$13) with Gorgonzola, avocado and smoked pistachio pesto.

I could also be happy with any of the sides (\$7), especially the generous mound of lightly fried Brussels sprouts and several kinds of cauliflower tossed with a few arugula leaves. It could be a starter or an accompaniment to one of the five main courses.

There are about a dozen reasons to stay with the small plates. One is mussels, clams, fennel and fregola (\$14) in a rich broth. Another is arancini (\$14), risotto balls with a gooey cheese center, served on lamb Bolognese and topped with tapenade. Another good choice is the house-made cotechino (\$13) - "hot dog," as it's called on the menu, on a bed of lentils, a tiny mince of carrots and precise dices of apples.

There are also seven table snacks, including Buffalo wings (\$10), and juicy and tender meatballs (\$10) in a tomato sauce that leaves a little heat in its wake.

The charcuterie presentation is also nice. Thin slices of salumi, prosciutto and a pig skin terrine (three pieces \$9; five for \$15) arranged with two kinds of mustard, bread sticks, cornichons, pickled cauliflower and onions, as well as a small fruit salad.

Our waiters were always eager, but I never trust anyone who doesn't write down an order; the average that everything will be right diminishes with each dish they have to remember. Sure enough - on one visit the waiter forgot the pork chop (\$24), which we realized when he brought over the dessert menu. When we pointed out the mistake, he simply said, "Right away," but it took 20 minutes.

Still, it was worth the wait. The chop was cooked perfectly, slightly pink in the middle, and served with white beans flavored with speck, arugula and salsa verde, with thin fried shallots scattered over the top. On subsequent visits the staff was better, but even at their best they weren't nearly as competent as the kitchen staff.

Good rib eye, quail

On other visits I was captivated by the rib eye for two (\$59). Rosy, charred meat was sliced over a bed of smashed roasted potatoes with a crust so crisp it seemed deep-fried. The meat was flanked by two large bread-crumbs-covered marrow bones roasted in the wood oven. I also loved the roasted quail (\$26) on grilled polenta, charred asparagus and a chop of piquant pickled eggs that helped cut the richness and restart the palate between bites.

I can just see Italian grandmothers weep and secretly try to figure out the recipe for Reddington's version of veal breast (\$24), rolled and placed on top of saffron risotto and refreshed with gremolata, a mix of parsley, garlic and lemon peel.

Dessert includes a sundae (\$8) with malt ice cream, whipped maple and candied sunflower seeds that looked too interesting to pass up. It was fine, but not nearly as compelling as if it had been made with chocolate or caramel sauce and toasted pecans or walnuts. Still, I'd score one for creativity.

I did appreciate the crisp cannoli (\$8) with toffee, ricotta and almonds; and the cool butterscotch semifreddo with strategically placed kernels of caramel corn and a bourbon sauce. And few chocolate desserts can compete with the chocolate caramel tart (\$9) that was a crunchy base of praline, with rich layers of caramel, chocolate, a sprinkling of sea salt and a puff of whipped cream; I barely made a dent in it, but took the rest home for a next-day treat.

It was a good reminder of what I had the night before, and fueled my anticipation for the next visit.

Redd Wood

6755 Washington St., Yountville

(707) 299-5030. redd-wood.com

Breakfast 8-10 a.m. daily; lunch and dinner continuously 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Monday-Thursday, until 11 p.m. Friday-Sunday. Full bar. Reservations and credit cards accepted. Free lot.

Overall: Rating: THREE STARS

Food: Rating: THREE STARS

Service: Rating: TWO STARS

Atmosphere: Rating: THREE STARS

Prices: \$\$\$ (Most main courses less than \$25)

Noise rating: Noise Rating: FOUR BELLS Can only talk in raised voices (75-80 decibels)

Rating: FOUR STARS Extraordinary Rating: THREE STARS Excellent Rating: TWO STARS Good Rating: ONE STAR Fair Noise Rating: BOMB Poor

The wine list

Like many restaurants in the Napa Valley, Redd Wood is a worthy destination for oenophiles.

Markups are fair for the exacting inventory and the quality of wine. Because the food has heavy Italian overtones, it makes sense that the wine list concentrates on Italy and Napa.

Sommeliers William Sherer and Jess Kellogg have amassed some of the great wines of Italy, including the 2006 Masi Costasera Amarone; it's \$85 on the list and retails in the \$60 range.

The California selections are primo, with many hard-to-get labels such as Araujo, Alta, Harlan, Bond and Grace. The wines are expensive, but it might be the only chance some people get to try them.

While many are priced in the low three digits, you can also find some good selections in the \$30-\$40 range. While there are 40 sparkling and white wines, there are more than 115 reds, including more than 20 Nebbiolos.

With the thought that went into the list, it's surprising there are misspellings. And, while the layout was designed to be user-friendly - categorized by weight and characteristics - it's difficult to rely on a varietal name for Italian blends.

If you bring your own wine, corkage is \$25.

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.

Reviewers: Michael Bauer (M.B.), Nicholas Boer (N.B.), Tara Duggan (T.D.), Mandy Erickson (M.E.), Amanda Gold (A.G.), Allen Matthews (A.M.), Miriam Morgan (M.M.), Carol Ness (C.N.) and Carey Sweet (C.S.)

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