

Munchy MARCH

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FOOD

BY TODD SOUTH



Monaciello serves Italian fare like these mussels in a dijon vermouth sauce with roasted cherry tomato, cilantro, almond and shallot.
PHOTO/ALLISON YOUNG

Little wonder

Monaciello is housed in a pleasant, cozy room with seating for just under 40. The service and attention to detail are impeccable. Part of me wants to find the restaurant larger digs, but the intimacy and quality of the dining experience might suffer. Best to appreciate it for what it is: a welcoming space that works for date nights, business lunches, weekend brunches and upscale family meals, if you get in early.

My group of kids and adults arrived at the beginning of Sunday dinner service, starting with garlic bread (\$7)—a large, crusty Italian roll sliced on the bias and stuffed with plenty of butter and fresh garlic. Three impressively large, classic Italian meatballs (\$7) followed, with housemade marinara and freshly grated Parmesan.

A pork belly appetizer (\$11) with peach habanero jelly, bacon butter, pickled shallots, chipotle walnuts, corn and cilantro was crispy, tender and an enjoyable implementation of this trendy bit of pig. Rounding out the apps was an order of mussels (\$13) with roasted cherry tomato, cilantro, almond, shallot and Dijon vermouth sauce. The shellfish were almost second fiddle to the rich, decadent sauce and veggies. We ordered a half loaf's worth of warm ciabatta (\$2) to sop up and savor the abundant gravy.

A Mediterranean salad (\$7) of tomato, artichoke hearts, kalamata olives, cucumber, red onion, cherry pepper and feta tossed in balsamic and olive oil had a nice vinegar snap. A poached pear salad (\$7) with spicy pecan, Gorgonzola, cold fried shallot, arugula and pear vin provided an interesting combination of light and bold flavors.

Next was a calamari steak (\$14) with sauteed cavatelli, green beans and pancetta, topped with tapenade and garlic lemon cilantro butter; and a dish of grilled swordfish (\$17) with "forbidden" black rice, yellow pepper coulis, teardrop pepper,

sauteed green beans and Mediterranean salsa. The squid and fin fish were done right, and both dishes were completely enjoyable.

Crab *tortellacci* was substituted as ravioli (\$16) with the same ingredients, including leek, corn, sweet pepper salad, tomato coulis and pesto *creme fraiche*. The crab flavor was excellent, and the counterpoint of red sauce with white made the dish. Porcini mushroom ravioli (\$14) topped with a salad of crispy pancetta, arugula, grilled artichoke heart and peas was the weirdest and greatest pasta salad I've encountered.

With curiosity, I ordered smoked salmon *spaetzle* (\$16) with dill, shallots, lipstick peppers and ancho chili cream served over grilled ciabatta and topped with candied lemon zest, almonds and arugula. It was fantastic. As with the rest, the sauce really sold it.

I just had to try a "G2" pizza (\$22 for a 12-inch pie) with red sauce, spicy shrimp, leeks, almonds, cherry peppers, bacon, feta, lemon zest, dill and ancho. The crust was thin and crispy—and holy wow. That combination of savory, tart and spicy flavors was next level. Even the hardcore keto dieter in our midst snagged a slice with no regrets.

Desserts (\$7 each) change from day to day, although a mason jar chocolate mousse parfait with roasted pecan and torched marshmallow topping is a regular item. A brownie with fluffy mint and strawberry topping wasn't bad, but the deep-fried apple bread pudding should be a regular item. It was like a candied apple fritter, with a creme brulee crunch and fluffy, diced apple interior. I'm not big on desserts, but I'll never forget that terrific finish to our memorable meal. □

Monaciello

190 California Ave., 507-7540

Monaciello is open Monday, Wednesday and Thursday from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m., Friday from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m., Saturday from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. and Sunday from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. Learn more at monacielloreno.com.