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FOOD

BY TODD SOUTH



A prosciutto pizza comes topped with arugula, mozzarella, shaved parmesan and olive oil.
PHOTO/ALLISON YOUNG

Old guard

With over 20 years providing Italian fine dining to Renoites, La Vecchia is the kind of romantic place folks often reserve for special occasions. After two previous location changes, the third time was definitely the charm. It has a comfortable yet elegant ambiance, al fresco seating and skyline views of the city. I haven't been in years, so a recent visit from a friend who's an Italian food fanatic was the perfect excuse to head up the hill to get our *mangia* on.

A complimentary serving of crusty bread was great dipped in balsamic vinegar and olive oil, soon followed by a *salsiccia* plate (\$13). Three partly sliced links of Spanish chorizo, cured pork and wild boar sausage were laid upon a bed of sauerkraut and Calabrian chilies and accompanied by a strong, briny tapenade, whole grain Dijon mustard, freshly pickled veggies, seasoned almonds and herbed tomato chutney. The cured pork was mild, the chorizo salty and slightly spicy, and the boar was sweet with just a whiff of gaminess. The pickled items were tart and sharp, and I'd love to have a jar of that mustard. All in all, the accoutrements were excellent and fun to sample against the tasty meats.

A wood-fired pizza with prosciutto, arugula, mozzarella, shaved parmesan and olive oil (\$15) sounded good, but was a little uneven. The crust was exemplary, crispy and golden with tremendous flavor. The arrangement of toppings was visually appealing. Unfortunately, an overabundance of the peppery fresh greens drowned out the other ingredients. It was still good—especially when dipped in vinegar and oil—but why bother with the meat and cheese if you can't taste them?

My friend's chicken parmigiana (\$20.50) pleasingly bore little resemblance to the breaded cutlet drowned in red sauce we've come to expect. A large, boneless chicken breast was covered in a

Parmesan crust, cooked so perfectly tender and juicy I suspect otherworldly forces were at work. Topped with melted mozzarella, fresh tomato and herbs, it was impressively delicious with a side of flavorful, braised spinach.

As someone who isn't big on squash, I found an order of pumpkin sage ravioli in a butter and sausage ragout (\$16.50) was a surprising delight. The pasta pockets—with pleasantly crisp edges—had a smooth filling I find hard to describe, other than it was one of the best things I've tasted. The subtle sauce included big chunks of hearty sausage, and crispy fried basil leaves. I probably would never try this on my own, but I'm sure glad we did.

My bowl of seafood linguine (\$23.50) looked great, loaded with basil shrimp, bay scallops, calamari, mussels, clams and garlic in a white wine sauce. Every bite of seafood was exquisite, bolstered by the simple-yet-rich broth. Alas, the pasta was imperfectly cooked and gummy, tasting of raw flour. After a couple bites, I gave up on the noodles and dug around to rescue all the *frutti di mare*. This just made things worse. The pasta starch leached into the sauce, which thickened into a sort of not-good gravy—odd, given the other dishes' quality and, frankly, kind of a bummer.

Service was friendly and professional on a level I wish was more common. Lacking a belly full of pasta, I had room to share a completely enjoyable square of tiramisu (\$7). It was fluffy, not heavy or too sweet—an ideal way to end our meal. □

La Vecchia Italian Restaurant

3005 Skyline Blvd., 825-1113

La Vecchia Italian Restaurant is open Monday to Friday from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. and 5 to 9 p.m., and Saturday and Sunday from 5 to 9 p.m.

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