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Ready or Nut

Los Altos' eccentric L'Acquolina stumbles out of the gate

By Cheryl Sternman Rule

L'ACQUOLINA'S sleek website caught my eye months before the restaurant actually opened. Its name means "mouthwatering" in Italian, and the website promised inventive dishes like lobster agn olotti with andouille sausage and braised quail with morel mushrooms. My expectations were admittedly high. Plus, the proprietors' former restaurant, Tre Scalini in Healdsburg, had been hailed by prestigious foodie publications like *Gourmet* and *Food & Wine*. But after eating at L'Acquolina several times, it's clear that this new Los Altos restaurant has some work to do. Fortunately, its shortcomings aren't insurmountable (in fact, they may be par for the course for such a newly opened place), and with an experienced team behind it, it's likely to find its footing soon.

L'Acquolina occupies a corner lot in sleepy, upscale Los Altos, a few doors down from an antiques store and adjacent to You Are Beautiful Skincare. (Can't you imagine them answering the phone? "You Are Beautiful—may I help you?") The décor in the main dining room is a bit understated: some white platters and hydrangeas adorn one wall, but there's not a whole lot else to look at. Two smaller rooms in the back with some paintings are prettier.

Whereas Tre Scalini focused on Italian fare, L'Acquolina's menu spans Italy, France and Spain. One dish, the zuppa di zucca e gamberoni (squash bisque, \$9), even sported a large Creole fried shrimp floating in the center.

"I just like to do nutty things sometimes," says owner and chef Fernando Urroz, a friendly San Francisco native.

Along with his wife, Cynthia, the two sold their former restaurant in 1997 to spend more time with their children. Now they've ventured back into the business, and after multiple permitting mishaps L'Acquolina opened shop this past January.

And it's still finding its way. That acorn squash bisque was fine, but nothing special, the shrimp's breading dislodging and floating oddly on the soup's surface. The squash's natural sweetness cried out for a little acid or more seasoning and without it the flavor just fell flat. Another starter was much better. The dramatic carciofi al forno (\$8), a tender oven-baked artichoke, arrived stem-up in a little pool of olive oil, garnished with creamy aioli, a tangle of curly parsley and a sprinkling of fresh chives.

A word about chives, and asparagus for that matter. Though I ate at the restaurant twice in separate weeks, on both occasions the majority of the dishes my guests and I tried were garnished with minced chives. There's nothing wrong with this per se, but it struck me as unimaginative and a bit lazy. Barely sautéed chopped asparagus (mostly stems) also appeared alongside a chicken dish, a steak dish and a fish dish. It wasn't an interesting or even pretty enough preparation (why chop the spears into such a hash?) to accompany so many of the entrees, all three of which cost more than \$20. It's no fun pilfering bites from your friends' plates when all the side dishes are the same.

On a more positive note, I thoroughly enjoyed my spaghetti a la vongole e polpetti (\$17), a hearty portion of perfectly cooked pasta, cubed pancetta, Manila clams and tiny venison meatballs. The spunky tomato sauce had a pleasant kick and the meatballs were flavorful and moist.

The olive oil-poached branzino (\$21) was ho-hum. The fish was napped with a roasted red pepper tapenade, but the flavors simply didn't coalesce. I also had to steal a lemon wedge from my companion's bistecca fiorentina (\$27), a fatty but fairly tasty rib-eye served with the same white potatoes and asparagus as my fish. The pesto on the steak was nice, but the lemon wedge would have done far more for my entree than his.

Housemade tortoni (\$7)—vanilla ice cream studded with macerated cherries and coin-size amaretti cookies—made a simple but satisfying dessert.

L'Acquolina is well-staffed and waiters are attentive. But on my first visit the entrees arrived before the appetizers had been cleared, and for several minutes the server was at a complete (and awkward) loss about what to do. On our second visit, when my dinner companion asked for more bread, presumably from the basket brought around to all the tables, the waiter grabbed his plate, brusquely asking, "How many pieces do you want?" This might fly



Photograph by Felipe Buitrago

VEAL APPEAL: Vitello alla Capricciosa at L'Acquolina

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elsewhere, but not at a white tablecloth restaurant with hefty prices and fine dining aspirations.

I'm going to keep my eye on L'Acquolina as it evolves. They've just introduced a tapas-style bar menu featuring a handful of the appetizers, cheeses, fried olives and Serrano ham croquettes. In a few weeks they'll also begin lunch service. Successful restaurateurs know how to work out the kinks and chances are good that L'Acquolina will do just that. Let's hope it finds its groove soon.

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L'Acquolina

Address: 397 Main St., Los Altos

Phone: 650.948.4600

Hours: Dinner 5-9pm Tue-Sun (until 10pm Fri-Sat)

Cuisine: Italian, French, Spanish

Price Range: \$16-\$28

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