



Give Me an L

Hip is this wine bar's middle name

By Greg Sabin

L Wine Lounge & Urban Kitchen is modern, daring and unusual. It's also just a wee bit uncomfortable. From the hard wooden chairs to the cold concrete floors, the dining atmosphere can be a bit off-putting. This is not a place for a cozy, romantic dinner with your special someone; nor is it a place to take Mom for her birthday dinner. This is, however, a place for unique dishes, rare wines and palate expanders—no, not painful orthodontic devices, but dishes that expose you to new tastes, new preparations and new ingredients.

One of the newer establishments in the Gourmet Gulch/Handle District/Cap Ave. Corridor, L has established a niche as one of the hipper destinations in the neighborhood. A place for sipping wine, snacking on gourmet grub and partying with friends, L welcomes the happy-hour and late-night crowds with open arms. On the other hand, it presents a challenge to the diner who is looking for a full sit-down meal. One must expect a few eccentricities when dining at L—not deal breakers by any means, but small things that might put off the standard diner.

Chief among these eccentricities is the water. “How can water be eccentric?” you might ask. “By being served at room temperature,” I would answer. That’s right: Your regular table water, served promptly and politely by the friendly and capable staff, is served at room temperature, without ice. One might think that this deliberate choice by the management



L Wine Lounge & Urban Kitchen is a great place to meet with friends for a glass of wine and a bite to eat

has something to do with wine tasting, the condition of your taste buds or some other epicurean quirk. But no. According to owner/general manager Kolea Marquez, L has a top-of-the-line water filtration system, and she feels that by serving the water without refrigeration, one can taste the purity of the water. She’s right. The tepid water was, after the initial double take, pure and delicious.

Another peculiarity of L is its signature “L dust,” a condiment of ground hazelnuts, sesame seeds and spices that is served with bread and meant to be applied to the bread after a brisk dip in the accompanying olive

oil. It’s fantastic. A recipe of chef Ame Harrington, who was “looking for an alternative to bread and butter,” the dust is a small yet exciting touch that lets you know you’re in for something different, something unexpected.

The final eccentricity of L is its menu. Made up entirely of small plates, the menu consists of dishes that are meant to be shared, paired with wines and snacked upon. “We wanted something different,” Marquez said. “We wanted the kind of food that you’d find in a big-city environment—something that Sacramento hadn’t seen before.”

For dinner on a recent night, my wife and I opted to start with calamari and the featured red wine flight. The three reds that made up the flight, all Syrahs, were tasty without being memorable. The calamari, though, was exceptional: light, tender and perfectly cooked.

Next, we tried two small plates and a couple glasses of a fantastic Tempranillo recommended by our polite and excellent server. The first dish, pulled pork with polenta, was a hit. The pork, moist, rich and

Restaurant continued on page 28



The decor at L Wine Lounge & Urban Kitchen is sleek and modern

Restaurant continued from page 22

perfectly spiced, sat on a small pillow of creamy white polenta.

The second dish, gnudi, was a new one for me. Gnudi are Italian dumplings, similar to gnocchi, but made with ricotta cheese. Traditionally served with a minimalist accompaniment of prosciutto, cheese and fresh herbs, they're a menu item you don't see too often in these parts. These particular

dumplings exceeded my expectations with their light texture and rich flavor but, disappointingly, were overwhelmed by the frisée, tomatoes and other vegetables on the plate.

We finished off the meal with a trio of bite-sized chocolate cakes, all good but seemingly from different batches, as two of the cakes were a bit dried out, while the third was done perfectly.

The meal had its hits and misses, true, but that is the spirit of L. Taken all together, it's a dining experience that's hip, irreverent and risky. Reliable sources tell me that L's wine list is the most unique and eclectic of any restaurant or wine bar in town. The menu doesn't try to imitate either, including French, Italian and American dishes meant to titillate. Owner Marquez told me that she wants diners to have fun pairing wines with food, trying new things and experimenting. The excellent wait staff is more than happy to help you choose wines for the best possible pairings.

The expansive courtyard patio shared by the surrounding apartments makes a great place for a party. The creative menu offers a fine opportunity to try new things. The exciting wine list brings some hidden gems out into the light. Taken all together, is this a place where you go for a quiet dinner for two? Probably not. But it is a place where you can find a unique dining experience.

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