

Portelli Rossi shines under new ownership

BY LESLIE HARLIB
Contributor

When a loved restaurant changes hands, I'm always concerned. Will the concept morph into something less appealing? Will what I love about it strengthen, or disappear? Will it stay as comfortable as it used to be?

Happily, Portelli Rossi, which was taken over by Iranian-born Mason Yekrangi in February and opened officially in April, is better than ever under its new ownership.

One of the qualities that makes the former Kitchen-turned-Portelli Rossi so appealing is its outdoor dining patio. Yekrangi has further developed the open-air space with a small colonnaded railing, a brick-and-plaster wall, a second fountain and lush pots of greenery. The overall effect is like dining outdoors in Tuscany, and the bubbling fountains mask some of the traffic noise from Grant Avenue. Bright red umbrellas are available to shield the sun; there are heat lamps for chillier evenings.

Indoors, the restaurant still features a warm, informal room with colorful walls, crisp white tablecloths and Italian music in the background.

The dinner menu, under Portelli Rossi's new executive chef Joseph Hayanen, is as interesting to read as it is



LESLIE HARLIB PHOTOS
A salmon-and-sole rosette is served over carrot/ginger puree and steamed asparagus (above) at Portelli Rossi (interior, right).

fun to order from. There are several vegetarian dishes, including towers stacked with vegetables and either tofu, mushrooms or polenta (\$12). The chef has a feeling for color and seasoning as well. In every course, dishes tasted just right, didn't need salt, or leave me with the feeling of "if only it had a little more..."

A starter of bruschetta, for instance (\$8) yielded four garlicky toasts piled with chopped cannellini beans, chunks of heirloom tomatoes, feta cheese, fresh slivered basil under a slick of olive oil and balsamic vinegar. They were so flavorful and robust, each bite was like an explosion in the mouth.

Summery pole bean salad (\$8) combined cooked-just-until-crisp chilled green beans with thin circles of ten-



der beet as yellow as sunshine, crumbled feta and toasted slivered almonds. A Mediterranean salad took the classic combo of tomatoes, cucumbers and feta one step further, with red onions, kalamata olives and a spring mix. Our server added fresh-ground black pepper to boost all the components.

Fried calamari (\$11) featured plenty of thin-cut rounds and some tentacles, crunchy under a batter that hinted of cornmeal and fresh-ground black pepper. They were presented over spring mix — a great touch, which helped cut the richness of the squid.

Both pastas and main dishes were great values, given the large portions. Pastas are available in half or full sizes, so you can enjoy a half order of pasta as a starter, or

primo piatti in the Italian manner.

To my eyes, bowls of penne with vegetables (\$10 for a half order) and linguine with littleneck clams in a white wine sauce enriched with chopped tomato (\$11 for a half order) were big enough to be main dishes. The vegetable pasta was delicious, so rich in spears and florets of roasted broccoli, cauliflower, zucchini and red peppers, it was an ideal vegan entrée. The linguine was just as good — light, garlicky and crowned with more than a dozen fresh clams.

Main dishes included a nightly special of salmon and sole rolled together into a pretty pink and white rosette (\$17). Swirled with cream-enriched pesto sauce, served over a carrot/ginger

puree and teamed with fresh asparagus, it was unusual as well as utterly satisfying.

Veal piccata (\$18) featured three good-sized collops of natural veal, pounded thin, pepped with white wine, butter and capers, and paired with garlic-enriched mashed potatoes and broccoli. This, too, was a beautifully balanced plate.

Desserts (\$6), including ice creams, are all made in-house. The crème brûlée, floral with vanilla flavor and under the thinnest membrane of caramelized, crisped sugar, was one of the best I've tasted in this county. There's a moist, autumnal ginger cake, chocolate-chip-studded bread pudding and a sturdy espresso ice cream guaranteed to wake you up.

Several of the servers have been on staff since Portelli Rossi's earlier incarnation as Kitchen (it launched in 2004). They're good. They're personable, know the new menu well and will keep the rhythm of your meal going smoothly. I loved the fact that we got new flatware and fresh sharing plates for each course. It was the style I'd expect from fine dining with the price points of a casual, economy-savvy neighborhood restaurant. I'm impressed, and can't wait to go back.

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