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DINING UPDATE

:: Carneros Bistro :: Was it really five years ago that I reviewed the then-new Carneros Bistro in Sonoma? With so many places opening and so many high-profile chef changes, this place fell off my radar.

It came back into focus when an e-mail arrived from the new chef, Janine Falvo, asking me to come in to give her an opportunity to show what she's done with the menu.

I began to remember that when I reviewed the place, part of the newly built Lodge at Sonoma, the food was uneven. Yet the restaurant had an impressive modern style, with an open kitchen, high ceilings and large windows overlooking a garden that blocked the constant churn of traffic on Highway 12 right outside the door.

I knew things had improved remarkably when a white china slab arrived with slices of sunflower seed bread, a scoop of whipped butter flavored with what tasted like lemon verbena, and a little ramekin of warm, pitted olives. It's a great way to greet the customer with a little special touch.

The menu also includes some unusual dishes such as one night's special of fried frog legs, or fried green tomatoes (\$11). When the tomatoes came to the table, everyone around us asked the server what we were having. The petite galvanized bucket, with golden tissue paper flopping over the edge, was mounded with golden slices of fruit and a little ramekin of truffle aioli. The tomatoes were hot and crisp — a wonderful beginning.

The menu also includes such things as oysters and frites (\$12.50 for six), wood-fired pizza (\$12) and a take on a traditional Cobb salad (\$9) with watercress, paper-thin slices of dried prosciutto, avocado, onions, quail eggs and a wedge of blue cheese. It might not be classic, but at least you know the chef is trying to break out of the mold.

That's why I felt compelled to order the basil-fed escarrot (\$11), served with puff pastry and fried leaves of basil. The basil would have been better utilized reserved for hu-

man consumption; the little snails had no flavor and a rubber-band texture. It was one of the few dishes that faltered, and it was a dramatic failure at that.

Falvo and sommelier Chris Sawyer coordinate efforts by offering three bites — pea cappuccino, asparagus with lemon creme fraiche, and seared tuna with bacon emulsion (\$12) paired with a flight of sparkling wine, Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Noir (\$15). In fact, the well-chosen wine list incorporates several flights that are brought to the table in a wrought-iron carrier, with name tags on the wines so diners won't get confused.

I often back away from plates piled high with ingredients and goo, as was the case of the grilled pork chop topped with onions, spinach and a sauce (\$17). However, once I lightened the load on the meat I was impressed by the quality of the wood-fired chop, which retained a baconlike fla-

Vitals: Carneros Bistro & Wine Bar, 1325 Broadway (in the Lodge at Sonoma), Sonoma; (707) 931-2042. Breakfast 7-11:30 a.m.; lunch 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m.; dinner 5:30-10 p.m. daily. Full bar. Reservations and credit cards accepted. Free parking lot. Overall: ★★½ Food: ★★½ Service: ★★ Atmosphere: ★★½ Prices: \$\$\$ Noise: 🌲🌲🌲

vor from the hot sear. The greens and the sauce, too, were excellent.

The description of the accompaniments for the arctic char (\$21) was also intriguing — braised fennel, Manila clams and "green tea." I wasn't sure how green tea and a fatty fish would bond, so we ordered it. The fish and vegetables were brought in a bowl with flared sides that brought to mind a boomerang, and our friendly but inexperienced waiter poured on a bright green herb broth, forming a kind of soup around the other ingredients. It helped to meld the flavors, adding a slight licorice nuance to the blend.

For dessert, I loved the fresh blueberry crisp with white peach ice cream (\$8), although the ice cream was so delicate it felt wasted on such a bold crisp; I would have loved to savor it on its own, with shortbread cookies. The caramel chocolate tart (\$8) was so deliciously intense that it needed the cooling vanilla ice cream for relief.

As we were eating, one couple began to chat with us during the long lags between courses and the expanses of time when our waiter disappeared. The lapses weren't enough to mar the experience but were slightly annoying. The service was efficient, but it was clear that the staff was somewhat inexperienced.

It seems the couple had booked a meal on the Wine Train, but for some reason it was canceled. On a Saturday night, they found it difficult to get into a Napa restaurant, so they drove over to Sonoma and basically stumbled upon Carneros Bistro.

They proclaimed their halibut with truffled hollandaise and lobster home fries (\$24) and the grilled steak with Dungeness crab twice-baked potatoes (\$27) one of the best meals they'd had in a long time, and after sharing a dessert, they left full of praise.

That's the way to start a buzz.

— Michael Bauer, mbauer@sfnchronicle.com