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96Hours

DINING UPDATE



Lunchtime in the principal dining area of XYZ, in the W Hotel on Third Street.

:: XYZ :: The management of the W Hotel has a great idea to reinvigorate the once-popular XYZ restaurant — offer half-price wine for the entire months of July and August. Diners can pick hundreds of wines from the international list, which includes more than 40 Burgundies and practically as many domestic Pinot Noirs. That means gems such as the 2003 Pisoni Vineyards Pisoni Vineyard Estate is \$62 and the 2003 Siduri is \$37.

That's quite a carrot to hold out, especially when Paul Piscopo's food is at the other end of the string.

When it premiered eight years ago, XYZ was hot, but a string of chefs, each with a slightly different style, has taken its toll. The bar, which actually has more seats than the dining room's 70, is still a popular destination, but the restaurant's buzz has waned.

With the help of the wine promotion, Piscopo now is heating up the cool, sleek dining room. His food is familiar, but with a twist. For example, he creates a tasting menu that focuses on a single ingredient, such as artichokes; the dessert on that menu was a lemon crepe with sweet artichoke ice cream. Piscopo's now orchestrating a four-course corn menu (\$54.95).

Fortunately, diners can also get these dishes on the a la carte menu, so I was able to get the thick slice of hamachi (\$16) drizzled with lemon oil and coriander, which made a nice foil to pickled baby corn and a tiny pile of dressed greens.

The a la carte menu features seven appetizers, including crab fritters on an English pea puree and lemon agrumato with olives (\$15), and asparagus with sherry vinaigrette, speck prosciutto, shaved pecorino and a quail egg (\$10). For more traditional tastes,

there's a very good chicken liver mousse served with pickled onions and cornichons (\$9) that's served with a dozen toast points, making it a great item to share with friends and a glass of Pinot Noir.

For main courses, Piscopo serves lamb two ways (\$28) — a chop with a thick, crusty sear, and an equally caramelized shank accompanied by potatoes, baby carrots and green and yellow wax beans.

Scallops (\$32) are also perfectly executed, served on a pile of deeply flavored corn risotto. Other items include a pan-seared halibut with porcini mushrooms (\$28), pan-seared sea bass with gnocchi and baby artichokes (\$26) and roast chicken with sa-voy spinach and an onion and potato gratin (\$23).

Desserts were as beautifully presented as the main courses but ultimately a bit disappointing. The pastry chef takes classics such as bread pudding and pound cake and dresses them up

by serving them in small pieces on a large plate. Two bites of blueberry bread pudding (\$9) were served next to half a champagne-poached apricot and a small scoop of apricot ice cream. It looked almost identical to the small rectangle of pound cake with strawberry jam in the center, a scoop of cherry amaretto ice cream and spiced almonds (\$8). Both dishes tasted fine, but seemed skimpy.

During the past few years, the hotel has worked to refine the restaurant's service and decor. The focal point is still the modern room with two-story windows overlooking Third Street and soaring ceilings broken up by the mezzanine above. Large, high-backed circular booths add an architectural element, as do the handsome marble-topped tables. A curved wall in back that used to be punctuated by a series of stained glass porthole windows has been softened with taupe floor-to-ceiling drapes, warming up the room.

The service has also continued to improve. The staff is clearly in charge, knows the menu and works well as a team.

Clearly, the W Hotel is trying to revive XYZ. It should be on the tip of everyone's tongue, particularly after a glass or two of that bargain-priced wine.

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181 Third St. (at Howard, in the W Hotel), San Francisco. Breakfast daily, lunch weekdays and dinner 6-10:30 p.m. nightly. Full bar. Reservations and credit cards accepted. Valet parking \$12. Overall: ★★ Food:★★ Service:★★ Atmosphere:★★ Prices: \$\$\$\$ Noise:★★