

## Bistro from 40W

a vigorous mango salsa and yellow squash with tomatoes. I had little hope for risotto, but this one, made with plantains, had a perfect consistency with a delightfully sweet touch of the tropics. Throw in chorizo, and it could stand alone as an entree.

The regular menu fare won't shortchange you on zest or originality. Escargot pizza with bris and wild mushrooms is an everyday appetizer, and it's a moist, savory treat of these gourmet goodies, not just gourmet piggishness. (The Nibbler advises sharing.) Familiar entrees get tasty twists, such as a blackberry glaze on rack of lamb and guava and *ancho* rum on pork chops. One entree that failed to excite on my first visit, a New York strip with clams, both done in Casino fashion, has been replaced by a more intriguing steak that has a coffeehouse crust, Kahlua demiglace and jerk fries.

A cumin-y Moroccan crust on grilled salmon and feta in the couscous salad add excitement to a healthy choice. More adventurous is tofu, sliced in medallions with a Parmesan crust, to contrast crispy and silky. Add tomato confit, roasted garlic and grilled spinach with a bit of smoke, and you've got more flavor than most other veggie entrees.

At least one side dish with every entree has extra style, such as sweet potato flan and panzella bread-tomato salad. Both are on the regular menu. As specials, you may find a porcini risotto cake or green papaya salad with shrimp.

Plenty of other goodies are scattered about the menu, from the lavish bread and white bean dip to the seared tuna appetizer, a whole-head Bibb lettuce salad with Great Hill blue cheese to upside-down apple pie and serious chocolate truffle cake.

The true and unexpected icing was service. In a place this new and small, at a time of low unemployment, I was prepared to make do. Color me most happily disappointed, especially on a second visit, when my server knew the menu and the kitchen's techniques, discussed them with excitement but not attitude and gave advice on wines. He also was quick to chase down a CD we couldn't place (Ella again, but like I'd never heard her).

The first glass of wine that night was the clincher, and I took my own. Let me explain: On my first visit, I was pleased that NCB didn't have the wine bar or license, so you could take your own, bought at retail prices.

We did on the second visit, and although wine had been added, ours was poured without complaint. When an errant fly took a dive in it, our server promptly offered to replace it with a complimentary glass. I took that later and found the after-dinner list a delightful collection of surprises. The very sharp and friendly wine steward steered me through one bad choice to a great one, a late-harvest zinfandel from the Norman Winery in Paso Robles, Calif., so jarring I could have been plucked from a palm tree.

The rest of the list is so imaginative and affordable you'd likely regret taking your own. Apertifs

include Lillet, amontillado, boutique vermouth and \$6 flutes of Lanson, a great house Champagne. The main list has 30 bottles from \$16 to \$25 and more than a dozen under-\$5 glasses; rieslings, gewurz, vinho verde, merlot, zins and Rhones from quality labels such as Bogle, Bonny Doon, Gundlach Bundschu, Jekel and Karly. Not to mention Dunedin microbrews, six bottled waters and a bar menu of solid food as nifty as the main room's.

One restaurant, even with a wine bar and a diner in the background, does not a new city make, but in this bistro, it feels and tastes like one.

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