

Once innovative, Rose Pistola emerges renewed

Michael Bauer

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When Rose Pistola opened in 1996, it was one of the hottest tickets in town - no, make that in the United States. That year it also won the James Beard award for best new restaurant.

At that time, chef-owner Reed Hearon could do no wrong, and with Rose Pistola he had the then-innovative idea of concentrating on the foods of Liguria. Few restaurants at that time offered such a narrow and deep point of view, but it paid off.

Over the intervening years, the restaurant strayed from that theme and started taking a more general approach to Italian food. Earlier this year, however, in anticipation of celebrating its 15th anniversary, the restaurant closed for two weeks to refurbish the interior and bring the menu closer to where it began. Mark Gordon, who also oversees the kitchens Terzo and Rose's Cafe, is now the executive chef, and Pablo Estrada, who has been in the kitchen for some time, is chef de cuisine.

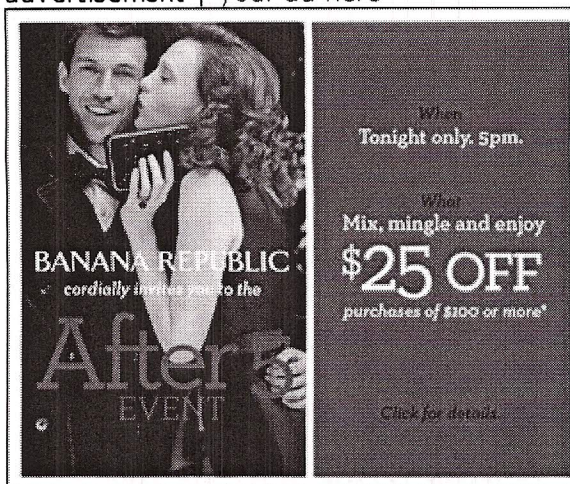
While it's still not as good as when it opened, things are looking up. I got some glimmers of the antipasti extravaganza that used to fill the counter in front of the wood-fired grills in the braised baby artichokes (\$10) arranged around a nob of fresh herbs and a hefty wedge of lemon. Nutty fried cardoons (\$10) peered through the crisp veneer of golden batter; they're served with bagna cauda and quarters of hard-cooked eggs.

The octopus salad (\$15) that I enjoyed on previous visits has been nicely updated; now it's a generous portion of seafood bathed in a lemony dressing with radishes and creamy gigante beans.

Antipasti were always a strength at Rose Pistola, and it's nice to see it coming back. The pizzas are also better than they were. On our Update visit, a 12-inch thin-crust pepperoni (\$17) also included a restrained glaze of cheese, scallions and a generous sprinkling of fresh oregano. Gordon also creates a pie with artichoke, olives and green garlic (\$16), and one with wild nettles, Parmesan and smoked bacon (\$15).

The half-dozen pastas include a few classics - spaghetti with seafood sauce (\$18) and penne with pork Bolognese (\$17) - and a soulful linguine with a meat sauce that you couldn't mistake for anything other than lamb, brightened with English peas and ricotta salata (\$17).

The main courses were better than on a previous visit, but aren't quite there yet. Halibut in parchment (\$27), for example, is topped with a mound of dressed greens and peas so that shards of burned



parchment cling like scales to the fish.

Terrorized New York strip (\$35) that tasted anemic on a previous visit has been rejuvenated. It's first marinated in salt and rosemary, which boldly infuses the meat, then is topped with compound butter to smooth and blend the flavors, and a pile of wild arugula that refreshes the palate.

Chicken al mattone (\$22), another dish I remembered not so fondly from a previous visit, was still best forgotten. The charred flesh gave way to meat that surprisingly had very little flavor.

The remodel also seems to have energized the staff; the sommelier was right there when we needed her, recommending a wine in our price range, and the waiters were adept at keeping the experience moving forward.

The biggest surprise came with desserts, which were less expensive, larger and better than before. Sacripantina is a dessert I could eat daily - three layers of rich butter cake with a sherry-kissed zabaglione in between and a cream frosting on top, sprinkled with crushed amaretti cookies; a puff of crisp meringue clings to the back, and piles of blueberry and a restrained line of sweet purple syrup completes the dish. I also loved the budino (\$7), a rich slice of cake with an intense espresso ice cream.

While I wouldn't normally think of going to most Italian restaurants for dessert, Rose Pistola changed my mind. It's a good thing to remember when you go to "Beach Blanket Babylon," for example, and want a place to stop in afterward.

In fact, I'll now put Rose Pistola near the top of the list when I get an e-mail asking for recommendations for after a performance of this long-running show. While Rose Pistola still has a way to go to recapture its glory days, it's on the right track. I hope to have even better things to report in the future.

Rose pistola

532 Columbus Ave. (near Union Street), San Francisco; (415) 399-0499 or rosepistolasf.com

Open continuously for lunch and dinner 11:30 a.m.-10 p.m. Sunday-Thursday, until 11 p.m. Friday-Saturday. Full bar. Reservations and credit cards accepted. Valet \$6 at lunch; \$11 at dinner.

Overall Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS
Food Rating: TWO STARS
Service Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS
Atmosphere Rating: THREE AND A HALF STARS
Prices \$\$\$\$
Noise Rating Noise Rating: THREE BELLS

Ratings key

