

Eating Out

RESTAURANT REVIEW

Piemonte luminary

New chef, new menu bring star quality to La Strada

by Dale F. Bentson

Osvaldo Tomatis is a celebrity chef of sorts. He was the executive in charge of food services at Pixar Animation Studios during the filming of the hit film "Ratatouille." His kitchen was used to film many scenes, with the images of line cooks translated into animation.

Tomatis had been the executive chef at Il Fornaio in San Francisco when Apple's Steve Jobs, who was CEO of Pixar at the time, recruited him to take over onsite food services at the studio's high-tech digs in Emeryville. Jobs loved rustic Italian cooking and wanted someone who could nourish his creative brain-trust film company, Italian-style.

Tomatis is now the chef at La Strada in Palo Alto. He is a native of Turin (Torino), in Italy's food-conscious Piedmont (Piemonte) region. There his family owned both a farm and a restaurant, where he began working at age 14.

By age 18, he was eager to make his own mark on the culinary world and relocated to Redwood City to live with an uncle. He start-

ed cooking part-time and worked his way up with stints in the Bay Area and the Pacific Northwest.

Tomatis took over the helm at La Strada four months ago, reshaping the menu and infusing new life into the five-year-old restaurant. He replaced chef Donato Scotti, who recently opened his own restaurant in Redwood City.

"My menu is traditional Italian but with local produce. I am market-sensitive, and use what is seasonal at farmers' markets," Tomatis said. "The menu will adjust seasonally." The food at La Strada is less Americanized than the fare at most of our local Italian restaurants, and far tastier.

Physically, the restaurant is both contemporary and functional. The kitchen and wood-burning brick oven line one side while zesty mustard- and ochre-colored walls add a spacious feel to the two dining rooms. There is an enclosed patio for year-round semi-al fresco dining.

At a recent meal, the focaccia was house-



The marinated and grilled veal rib-eye is served with roasted asparagus and eggplant.

made and came with an ice-cold tomato tapenade. Too bad it wasn't served at room temperature because the flavors were locked in, leaving the paste nearly flavorless.

The antipasti were all first-rate, though.

Crostone was warm porcini mushrooms, radicchio and fontina cheese layered over grilled ciabatta bread (\$9). A meal in itself: fresh, earthy, flavorful and pretty on the plate, and a blissful autumn dish.

Shawn Fender



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