

The Oregonian

All things Italian at Vitis

Friday, December 03, 2004

Before a movie at the gay film festival earlier this fall, I saw an on-screen ad for an Italian restaurant and wine bar that had completely escaped my radar.

Given its offbeat location and unassuming storefront, it's easy to see how I had missed Vitis Enoteca. Tucked into a basement space on a stretch of Northwest 16th Avenue that doesn't get a lot of traffic, this is a place that you really have to seek out. For fans of light bites and wine, it's worth the effort.

The menu consists mostly of small plates, with the kitchen showing a particularly sure hand with the deep fryer. The baccala fritters of dried salt cod are light and crunchy, and the calamari is crisp and not overly salty. Even a fried walnut popover dessert shows a lot of sizzle.

Other dishes are worth a look, as well: malfatti, the house specialty; an oversized spinach-and-cheese dumpling; and the tender grilled quail.

The small plates theme stops with the salads, heaping plates of escarole and watercress easily big enough to share.

A couple of dishes fall short, such as an overcooked plate of sauteed mussels and clams in a saffron sauce that could use a little more kick, or a grilled eggplant that was tough.

Vitis' strongest suit is its wide-ranging wine list, which features more than 50 wines available by the glass, making it easy to explore the range of Italian wines, for instance, moving from pinot grigio to Dolcetto to Chianti over the course of a meal. Linger over the last sip or two of a hearty red wine paired with a slice of bittersweet chocolate tart is a fine way to spend a chilly night.

535 N.W. 16th Ave.; 503-241-0355. Open for lunch and dinner Tuesdays-Saturdays.
Grade: B -- Grant Butler