

## Monti's completes trifecta

Owners of Willi's Wine Bar, Willi's Seafood Bar open third impressive restaurant

By JEFF COX

FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

**W**hen Mark and Terri Stark moved to Sonoma County from San Francisco and opened Willi's Wine Bar in 2002, I never conceived that Willi's was just the beginning of the Stark revolution.

Encouraged by the success of Willi's mix of delicious small plates of food, well-chosen wines, and comfortable, friendly atmosphere, they opened Willi's Seafood Bar in Healdsburg late last year. Lo and behold, people liked that place, too. But I secretly wondered if Mark, who's the chef (Terri runs the rooms), wasn't spreading himself too thin.

Then in June of this year, the Starks opened Monti's Rotisserie and Bar in Montgomery Village. Now I really became concerned about Mark's — or anyone's — ability to keep three restaurants operating at top quality. Especially when I know that plans are afoot for them to open Twist, an upscale lounge and wine bar, on Mendocino Avenue between Fifth and Seventh streets.

Not to worry. I was even more impressed by the food at Monti's than at the two Willi's. As long as the Starks keep opening restaurants as good as these, I'm all for them. The secret to keeping up the quality is Mark's leadership in the kitchen, inventing dishes and showing the kitchen staffs how to prepare them, and in hiring talented chefs de cuisine who can keep the quality coming, such as Nunzio Esposito at Monti's.

The reason the fare at Monti's is so good is that the dishes display care taken in the kitchen with high quality ingredients and their preparation.

They display a cook's passion for stimulating the senses



JEFF KAN LEE / The Press Democrat

There's seating for 11 at the long full bar at Monti's Rotisserie and Bar in Montgomery Village. The restaurant has recently gone in where Feast restaurant used to be in the shopping center.

with combinations of flavors. And they display inventiveness: creativity and the courage to try something different.

Not everything works perfectly, of course — mint on the sausage pizza is weird — but enough of it does to make Monti's an exciting place for lunch or dinner. A lot of foot traffic passes by in Montgomery Village, and Monti's is conveniently in the center of things. A restaurant called Feast was there before, and before that an Italian restaurant, and before that Lisa Hemenway's. At lunch on a recent warm day, the 12 tables outside under the pergola were filled with shoppers taking a break.

Inside, the place has been redone. A long full bar with 11 stools has been installed, and the warm ochre and red earth walls, bare wood tables, metal filigree, and Mexican tile flooring produce a vaguely New Orleans feel — although I assume Monti's is named for Montgomery Village the way Field Marshall Montgomery was nicknamed Monty during WWII. The Starks also didn't have to

change the cocktail napkins. The "W" of Willi's becomes the "M" of Monti's if you turn it upside down.

Service was very professional. I was impressed that both my waiter and the room manager seemed to know every ingredient of every dish I asked about.

A Bellini cocktail made of Italian sparkling prosecco and fresh peach puree was done exactly right. The wine list is modest in size and price but not in scope. "Summer Whites" include a 2003 Moschero from Boutari winery in Greece for \$26, 2003 Albarino from Vionta in Spain for \$26, and the 2003 Iron Horse "Rosato di Sangiovese" for \$22. All the whites are between \$22 and \$53. Among reds, there's a 2001 Duxoup Charbono for \$26, a 2001 Primitivo from Italy for \$23, and a 1999 Trecini "Ladi's Vineyard" Syrah for \$34, with all reds between \$23 and \$53.

As the Beatles sang sotto voce in the background, things started with a slew of gorgeous kumamoto oysters (\$2 each

### MONTI'S

**Restaurant:** Monti's Rotisserie and Bar, 714 Village Court, Santa Rosa

**When:** Open from 11:30 a.m. to 9 p.m. Sunday to Wednesday, closes at 10 p.m. Thursday to Saturday

**Reservations:** Sure. Call 568-4404

**Price range:** Moderate to expensive, with most big plates from \$18 to \$22

**Kid-friendliness:** ★★

**Wine list:** ★★★

**Service:** ★★★½

**Ambiance:** ★★★

**Food:** ★★★½

**Overall:** ★★★½

### Star rating system

★★★★ — Extraordinary

★★★ — Very good

★★ — Good

★ — Not very good

0 — Terrible

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## DINING

# MONTI'S: Hummus, Frito Misto are big hits

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★★★★). The thing about rating oysters on the half shell is that you can't add points for their preparation — for there is none. You can only take away points for messing them up. These were perfectly fresh, served icy cold (too many restaurants serve oysters warmish, which just isn't right) on a bed of crushed ice with cocktail sauce, mignonette, and lemon wedges for people like me who wouldn't think of dipping an oyster in cocktail sauce.

A part of the menu lists "Tastes" at three for \$9. You get to choose your three from among seven small portions. I picked the **sweet and sour cippolini onions (★★★)**. These are the flattened little onions you see in the stores but never buy because you don't know quite what to do with them. Stark knows. The onions are marinated (sour) and cooked, then chilled. Four of them are served with pine nuts and currants (sweet), drizzled with truffle oil and given a shake of minced parsley.

A second "taste" was **hummus and lemon oil (★★★★)**. This was the best hummus I've ever had, even at my Lebanese friends' house. How did Stark figure out hummus so perfectly? Yes, there's tahini, garlic, and ground chick peas (not pureed to a smooth paste but left with some texture), but also just the right amount of toasted, crushed cumin. And the lemon-infused oil was a brilliant finishing touch. It's served with crunchy toast, although I would have preferred a traditional soft flatbread.

My final "taste" was **spiced baby beets (★★★)**. The beets have that concentrated flavor that comes from roasting them. But then they show the flavors of garam masala — the Indian medley of spices like cardamom and cloves, with a little spicy heat. The spiciness lifts up the earthy beet like an offering.

Moving on to the part of the menu labeled "Small Plates," I tried the **frito misto (\$9 ★★★★★)** with an accompanying pot of lemon aioli, and it was perfect. This mixed fry included super fresh calamari, little shrimp, bits of onion, snap beans, and ultra-thin slices of de-seeded lemons, all dipped in a batter that, when given a plunge in clean hot oil, emerge light golden, with no oily residue, and that shatter with a satisfying crinkle when crunched between the teeth. Served with lemon wedges and flash-fried parsley.

**Hot chorizo sausage (\$8 ★★★★★)** was paired with watermelon relish. The sausage was straightforward, but the watermelon relish was an interesting, cooling mix of watermelon, currants, bits of goat cheese, marinated red onions, parsley, and salt.

Under the "Pastas and Pizza" part of the menu, I spied the **Merguez sausage and mint (\$11 ★★)** combo and had to try it. The crunchy-

chewy crust was baked just right and carried just a smear of tomato sauce. The sausage was spicy and crumbly-soft but the mint came on like a sheep rancher at a cattlemen's picnic. Oregano, yes; thyme, yes; but mint? It didn't work for me.

In this same menu category, I found **lemon pepper ricotta gnocchi with zucchini blossoms (\$13 ★★★★★)**, and this dish was outstanding. I just about had to nail the little gnocchi down to keep them from floating away, they were that light. Small halves of cherry tomatoes and wilted zucchini blossoms in a light butter sauce enhanced the gnocchi. I highly recommend this dish if you visit Monti's.

From the menu category of "Big Plates," I selected the **Alaskan halibut with tomato confit (\$18 ★★★★★)**. The tomato confit was made of tomatoes slow-roasted all day in an oven until they turn into little puddles of flavor. A large piece of halibut is baked in a super-hot oven until the outside is browned and toughened, but the inside is still juicy and flaky. As I cut into the fish, its juices spilled and mixed with the tomato juices, and then were swirled up on my fork along with a segment of fish. Delicious. The fish was topped with an olive tapenade and the plate was garnished with watercress.

The final menu category is "From the Rotisserie," and there's a different featured rotisserie item for every day of the week. Monday it's turkey, Tuesday pork ribs, Wednesday leg of lamb, Thursday suckling pig, Friday rack of veal, Saturday lavender roasted duck, and Sunday prime rib or two. As it was a Thursday when I stopped in, I had the **suckling pig with orange marmalade (\$20 ★★★★★)**. You get to eat high and low on this hog, with a portion of rib, loin, and leg. The pig is tender, rich, spicy, and wonderful. It must have been basted as it turned on the spit. It's served with a panzanella — an Italian salad with frisee, arugula, sliced cherry tomatoes, and crunchy bits of bread fried in oil.

For dessert I tried **espresso and cream granita (\$6 ★★★★★)** served with an almond and fennel biscotti (or is one biscotti a biscotto?). The granita are granular bits of frozen espresso coffee given a dollop of whipped cream dusted with cocoa powder. For a second dessert, I was in heaven when presented with a **cherry sorbet black cow (\$6 ★★★★★)** with a hazelnut biscotto. This black cow is a lump of cherry sorbet and one of vanilla ice cream in a glass with chocolate syrup and fizzy water. It's good right down to the scorpingsound you make with your straw when you reach the bottom.

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*Jeff Cox writes a weekly restaurant review column for Q. You can reach him at [jeffcox@sonic.net](mailto:jeffcox@sonic.net).*