

By Michael Bauer,
Chronicle Restaurant Critic
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As I waited for the first of my six dishes to arrive at Willi's Wine Bar in Santa Rosa, I regretted not ordering the bone marrow that passed by my table. The long sections of bones, split lengthwise, were accompanied by a stack of toasted brioche toast and sweet red onion marmalade (\$10).

The couple who ordered it looked somewhat perplexed as it was set before them. They barely bothered to take a bite before sending it back, saying, "We don't like them."

The friendly, knowledgeable waiter, who could talk about flavors in the food and what's in the wineglass with the same aplomb, cheerfully removed the offending plate. The couple turned down her offer for a replacement and headed for dessert.

Not like bone marrow?

It wasn't the preparation that was the problem, but people who didn't know what they were getting. It broke my heart; too few places offer this delicacy.

Yet it also points to a larger issue: The eclectic menu at Willi's isn't for a reluctant palate. The small-plates menu is far from exotic, but the flavors are bold and wide ranging, divided into four categories: Asian, Locally Grown, Mediterranean and French.

Some items are familiar - truffled french fries (\$9) and local asparagus with poached egg and anchovy vinaigrette (\$9), for example. Most veer further from the norm such as dark, soy-soaked five-spice potstickers filled with pork belly (\$9); rich foie gras poppers with roasted pineapple (\$15); pulled duck barbecue with white cheddar polenta (\$10); and baked oysters with guanciale and artichokes with a glaze of Parmesan (\$3 each).

From familiar to foreign

Every dish, while somewhat familiar, has an ingredient or technique that elevated it from the ordinary and made me want to order it. That's the reason I didn't order the bone marrow: I couldn't resist the Dungeness crab tacos (\$12) - three crisp shells that hold snow-white crab mixed with tiny dices of watermelon and mint, an unlikely but thoroughly refreshing combination.

I also couldn't resist the soft shell crab (\$16), lightly battered and arranged over a soupy bed of black bean sauce spiked with ginger and spring onions, another winning combination. Both were wise choices.

Meatballs are popular these days, and owner Mark Stark and chef John Stroup make theirs from chicken (\$10.50). They're glazed with pomegranate and take on a ruby hue; the sweetness is kept in check with the judicious use of chiles, lightly spicy puree of chickpeas and a cooling cucumber salad.

I wanted to order the entire 27-item menu, but I knew I had to order the sliders (\$15), which are chunks of nicely seared filet mignon on a tiny bun with creamed spinach and a gooey puddle of whole-grain mustard Bearnaise. It was the only dish that left me wanting, but I give them credit for trying. In other instances, Stroup's bold juxtaposition of flavors works beautifully.



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Bone marrow vs. quail

For my final dish, it finally came down to a choice of the bone marrow (\$10) or the pancetta-wrapped quail (\$11). After tasting it I'd be hard pressed to imagine the marrow could be any better. I can't remember when I had a moister bird. The crispy, salty wrapping alone was memorable, but when paired with sweet bursts of roasted grapes, crunchy fresh hazelnuts, peppery watercress and the tang of aged cassis vinegar, it was absolutely brilliant.

Desserts (all \$8) also put a smile on my face, and like the savory courses, each one had twist. After struggling over the six options - chocolate chunk and banana bread pudding? Orange blossom honey creme brulee with vanilla salt? Warm olive oil crepes with lavender roasted strawberries? - I finally decided on the ricotta beignets. They were actually more like doughnut holes, served warm on a divided plate with a compartment for the black pepper whipped cream, candied bacon bits and caramelized pineapple relish.

The combination was good, but the bacon really didn't add much, and the cream could actually have used more pepper to bring out the sweetness of the other items. The Meyer lemon pudding cake is a must-order because of the candied fennel and sun-dried blueberries. Flavors are straightforward, and the gentle nudge of the licorice brings out the best in the lemon.

Well-paced service

Just about every dish at Willi's can become a conversation piece, and the staff knows how to sell it. They like to recommend dishes, and they've learned the art of pacing the arrivals; on my Update visit I never had more than two items on the table at the same time.

Bussers periodically change out plates, and someone is always around so you can order another glass of wine from the interesting list that includes dozens by the taste or glass and several flights.

It's all served in a low-ceilinged roadhouse that seats 64. It feels cozy in cool weather, but at this time of year takes a backseat to the equally large patio that wraps two sides of the building. It feels great to be there.

I just wish I'd ordered the bone marrow.

Willi's Wine Bar

4404 Old Redwood Highway (near River Road), Santa Rosa; (707) 526-3096 or williswinebar.net.

Lunch, dinner 11 a.m.-9:30 p.m. Wednesday-Thursday; until 10 p.m. Friday-Saturday. Dinner 5-9:30 p.m. Sunday-Monday. Closed Tuesday. Beer and wine. Reservations and credit cards accepted. Free lot.