

## The Tablehopper

By Marcia Gagliardi

### Spring cleaning

Some changes are afoot in North Beach: after a year in business, Nua abruptly closed, and moving into its place is **Vicoletto** (550 Green St., 415-433-4000), at press time slated to open at the end of May. The name means “little alley” in Italian, and it’s no surprise the name is Italian because the owner, Francesco Covucci, is Calabrese (but has been living in San Francisco for five years), and the chef, Gabriele Lastaria, is Neapolitano. They will be putting together a seasonal menu and are committed to using quality ingredients, plus they will be making pastas in-house, like tagliatelle, ravioli and gnocchi. The restaurant will be open for dinner from 5-11 p.m.

One closure locals were happy was not happening is **Jazz at Pearl’s** (256 Columbus Ave., 415-291-8255)! Kim Nalley, the (now-separated) wife of the owner, reportedly ended up getting the club in the divorce settlement and some new backing money came through, so the club won’t be closing. Nalley sang Tony Bennett’s, “The Best Is Yet To Come” when making the announcement to a packed audience one night in April.

More news in North Beach: I’m hearing the former site of the Pagoda Palace Theater on Washington Square (1741 Powell St.), next to the Washbag space, might become another location for La Corneta Taqueria, a relative to the popular taqueria in Glen Park. I spoke with consultant Martin Kirkwood of Terra Nova Projects, and he filled me in that even though the planning commission meeting is slated for August, the soonest we’d even hope to see anything would be 2010. Owner Joel Campos has had the space for four years, but due to the Telegraph Hill Dwellers’ repeated objections, the project continues to be stymied

(he has submitted 10 different designs and concepts and counting for the building, and each one has been shot down). And so the building remains unused.

Here’s a restaurant that is moving ahead: fans of the ever-popular Street on Polk will be happy to know that a second concept called **Crave** (2164 Polk St.) is opening just across the street in the former Teavana space. Owner John Lamkin and his wife, Lynn Ramsey, will be opening a quick-casual and affordable 45-seat spot, serving breakfast, lunch and an early dinner, all made with seasonal and quality ingredients. The menu will include breakfast favorites like egg sandwiches, house-made scones and breakfast burritos, and lunch will bring some of their mighty good soups, salads and tasty sandwiches that will highlight slow-roasted meats and fish. Dinner will be heartier, and some vegetarian fare will also be available – dishes will span from New American to Latin flair. An expanded brunch will be coming later, with house-smoked salmon and egg dishes. There will also be organic and biodynamic wines on offer, plus some microbrews as well. You can even swing by late afternoon for a bite of some charcuterie or hummus and a glass of wine at the outdoor seats (there will be 12 or so), or inside at the banquettes and tables. Lamkin, a resident of the neighborhood for the past 25 years, really wanted to create a space where it’s easy for people to get the kind of food they want and how they want it, made with quality ingredients, at a good price. He’s currently talking with some potential kitchen partners, but no one is final just yet. Look for an opening in late July, with intended hours of 7 a.m.-7 p.m. or so. They are also discussing curbside service, with breakfast or box lunches to go!

A big project that had the culinary set excited just went kaput: chef Sean O’Brien of the now-shuttered Myth was going to partner with the Sprezzatura Management Group (Andrew McCormack and Joe Hargrave of Frisson and Laiola), and launch a concept together in the Frisson space. Raising money proved to be difficult, and the Sprezzatura Group has decided to part ways as well (reportedly there are no hard feelings). The Frisson space is now on the market, Hargrave will continue focusing on the operations of Laiola, and McCormack is returning to hedge funds. No word on where O’Brien is off to next; stand by.

Speaking of **Laiola** (2031 Chestnut St., 415-346-5641), did you know they started serving lunch on Saturdays and Sundays from 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m.? There is also some new outdoor seating, with room for 12, plus heaters. Enjoy.

In case you’re heading to **Campton Place Restaurant** (340 Stockton St., 415-781-5555) for some of Boris Portnoy’s extraordinary desserts, unfortunately you will no longer find him there. He’s left the restaurant and is consulting at the moment – we’ll have to see where he lands (I have one idea where that might be). In other news, Campton Place’s executive chef, Sriyith Gopinathan, has introduced lunch and dinner menus that blend flavors and ingredients inspired by the Spice Route, the centuries-old trading channel from Asia to Europe.

Downtown’s hidden French outpost, **Les Amis** (568 Sacramento St.) has closed. No word yet on who may be buying the space.

Cigar smokers will be pleased to hear **Palio D’Asti** (640 Sacramento St., 415-395-9800) got a tobacco license and has stocked a humidor with all kinds of stogies. For those

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### Not-to-Miss-Dish: Albona’s pasta strudel

A restaurant doesn’t survive 20 years off the beaten path without a tasty, unique menu, and the strudel con pasta fatta in casa (strudel with homemade pasta) at Albona restaurant is as sure a testament to this as any dish in the Northside. Beloved owner Bruno Viscovi recently retired and passed the torch to his trusted chef of 10 years, Samuel Hernandez, and Michael Bruno, his nephew who has run the front of the house for the past five years. Hernandez and Bruno will likely bring a touch of the new generation to Albona, but they are also smart enough not to mess with a good thing – specialties hail-



Pasta strudel

ing from Viscovi’s Istrian upbringing in Albona, a hillside town located southeast of Trieste and bordered by Slovenia, Croatia, and Italy. The pasta strudel is a perfect example of why Albona is still packed night

after night: jelly roll-shaped fresh pasta filled with thin slices of baked prosciutto and Lappi (a semisoft semisweet cheese from Finland), baked bubbling hot in a casserole with toasted bread crumbs and a creamy béchamel tomato sauce. It’s one of those rich, rustic pasta dishes (like the Beggar’s Purse at Vivande) that as one regular told me, elicits “cravings that have to be answered.” I have no doubt I’ll be answering mine again soon.

**Albona Ristorante:** 545 Francisco St. (at Mason); dinner Tue.-Sat. from 5 p.m.; 415-441-1040, www.albonarestaurant.com

– S. Reynolds

### Newly Notable: Waterbar

We came for the seafood and, of course, I would return for the briny, plump oysters, the silky ceviche and the succulent lobster, but I’d also return to sit near and watch Wolfgang and Barbara.

Yes, I know, I know. Wolfgang Puck, like a lot of middle-aged men has divorced his long-time wife, Barbara, and moved on to another, but their namesakes, two amazing Wolf eels, live on in one of the aquariums at Waterbar.

We started out with 10 oysters and a couple of littlenecks for Susan, my dining companion. Once again the Connecticut oysters, which come from Long Island Sound, were the best. When Ron Owens joined me here for lunch a couple of months ago, we raved about these juicy morsels.

I then opted for the sea bass and sea urchin roe, while Susan tucked into a bowl of cold sweet pea soup, garnished with a lemon chantilly and mint oil. It was so rich, she ate about half; I had a couple of spoonsful – a lovely mélange.

One of the highlights of the menu was the fried smelts. Both Susan and I grew up eating them on the East Coast, and Waterbar’s were whole, crisp, and served with finger-

ling potatoes and aioli.

We both opted for lobsters; Susan the pressed Américaine. This lobster was out of the shell and cooked in a light tomato sauce with cream, shallots, garlic, tarragon, and thyme, then flamed with cognac for a truly impressive dish.

I had the wood oven-roasted one-and-one-quarter-pound lobster – truly moist and tender; however the marble-sized potatoes served with it were a little underdone. We also had some sautéed artichoke hearts, which unfortunately were smothered in too much tarragon.

But these are small quibbles. I had one bite of a s’more-like dessert, while Susan indulged her sweet tooth.

Waterbar has hit its stride and is a magnet, especially for its outdoor seating on a balmy night. It’s not an inexpensive restaurant, but with the bridge view, the seafood, the professional, yet friendly service, Waterbar will continue to draw crowds. And you can say hi to Wolfgang and Barbara for me.

**Waterbar:** 399 Embarcadero (near Folsom); lunch daily from 11:30 a.m., dinner nightly from 5:30 p.m.; 415-284-9922, www.waterbarsf.com

– G. Walden

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