

First Bite

Risibisi

By Therese Nicol

Don't misunderstand. I love P-Town, but last year my love didn't stop me from spending a considerable amount of my income to get away from it for a long holiday. Maybe if Risibisi on Petaluma Boulevard had opened a year earlier, I'd still have money left over in the travel coffer, because Risibisi is an escape. Walking off the street into this oasis of urbanity is like stracciatelle for the soul, it makes you feel good, with a worldly touch that mom just didn't have.

The design of the restaurant is carefully thought out and meticulously implemented. It's shiny clean with an eclectic blend of earthy brick walls and dried flowers juxtaposed with modern art and slick, white light fixtures that resemble space-age chrysanthemums. The sophisticated music sends you drifting into a separate reality from the street just 20 paces away, and if you do what we did and start your meal with a Champagne mojito (\$7), you'll land on Planet Risibisi in no time.

The folks who work and manage Risibisi are natural and friendly, but not so casual that you lose the sense of your own specialness. If it weren't for the fact that both times I've eaten here I've seen people that I know, I could have convinced myself that I was in New York, perhaps even Paris.

In order to keep the dishes and ingredients freshly seasonal, the menu changes weekly. On a recent jam-packed Saturday, my friend started with an organic baby beet salad (\$7) dressed in a beautiful vinaigrette that coated the arugula and watercress without disguising the greens' distinctive characteristics. Studded throughout with candied pecans, dry ricotta, beets and blackberries, it had sublime complexity of flavor. I hit it off with Harry's Bar carpaccio (\$10) which was paper thin, Valentine-tender and anointed with a sprinkling of capers, black truffle oil and shaved Parmesan. It was good while it lasted--which wasn't long.

For main courses, we chose pan-roasted halibut (\$18) and butter nut squash ravioli (\$14). Despite its long trip from Alaska, the large filet of halibut was exquisitely fresh and came with grilled asparagus and a portobello mushroom imbued with the sweet flavor of fresh thyme. The little swizzle of lobster bisque at the bottom added a nice visual component, but did little to impart additional taste.

My ravioli came packed with a wonderfully rich squash purée, and the pasta reminded me of the stuff from an ancient ravioli factory in Eureka that my dad once doted on. The lovely red chard underneath added an interesting earthiness to the dish. Dusted with spices and glazed with browned butter, the pasta pillows set the stage for the autumn that's just at our doorstep.

The pistachio crème brûlée (\$6) and the warm Mission fig strudel (\$7) sounded good enough to tempt, but they were somewhat of a letdown. If you're hungry for a sweet after, stick with the superb vanilla gelato.

Risibisi is a fine addition to the downtown P-Town scene. In addition to dinner, I've also enjoyed a wonderful lunch there, featuring a very reasonable \$12 two-course prix fixe menu. My next frontier will be the Sunday brunch, which makes its debut on Sundays at 10am. The menu promises crêpes, omelettes and frittata, and because I'll use any excuse to travel, I'll be there.

Risibisi, 154 Petaluma Blvd. N., Petaluma. Open for lunch Monday-Friday; dinner, daily. Sunday brunch begins at 10am. 707.766.7600.