

## ■ Restaurant review

# Oregano's Grill & Wine Bar serves a spice of Italian life

The restaurant, located at 830 Olive St., has more than 400 wines to complement its selection of fine food

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Oregano's Grill & Wine Bar, located at 830 Olive St., advertises that it is one of Eugene's newest Italian restaurants, but owner Spencer Whitted is no stranger to business in the downtown area. In the past, the entrepreneur has served as general manager of the Eugene Hilton and owner of the Rock 'N Rodeo bar. With Oregano's, his latest venture in the restaurant industry, Whitted combines fine and family-style Italian dining in a versatile atmosphere where diners feel just as comfortable in chic attire as they would in jeans.

The décor of Oregano's, while cozy throughout, is different depending on where patrons sit. In the front, where the lighting is brighter and red brick and crimson-painted walls are adorned with gold leaf mirrors and paintings of the Mona Lisa (a nod to the restaurant's old moniker, Mona Lizza), the mood is slightly more elegant. Whereas the middle of the restaurant, where the bar is located, begins to feel more like a jazz club. The intimacy level increases with the close proximity of the tables and the dim lighting thrown by the tiny chandeliers that hang over them. On

some nights a pianist mixed right in with the diners can help set the mood.

In fact, the restaurant advertises a number of entertainment options and theme nights. "Date night," on Wednesdays, features bruschetta, Caesar salad, one pasta and two dishes for up to \$12.95, amaretto crème brûlée and a bottle of Oregano's own house wine. "Girl's Night," from 4-6 p.m. on Thursdays, features two-for-one appetizer specials and a complimentary bottle of wine if patrons come with one of their "best girlfriends."

The restaurant also sets itself apart with one of the most extensive

wine selections in the city. Oregano's bottle room has more than 400 wines, predominantly from Italy, Oregon and California, and the selection continues to grow. Patrons are encouraged to try the vino with "Wine Flights," which servers compare to a beer tasting at a micro-brewery. There are two "flights" on a given night, each consisting of three different types of wine served in ample sampling portions. In addition to the wine list, the restaurant also has a full bar and a creative martini menu.

As far as choices go, the food menu competes commendably with the wine list. In all areas, from appetizers to desserts, Italian home-style classics mingle with upscale, fine-dining choices. A loaf of herbed

bread, baked fresh at the restaurant every morning and served with quality olive oil and balsamic vinegar, comes with every meal.

My dining partner and I decided to start by trying a bit of everything, so we went for the antipasti sampler for \$14.95. It included bruschetta, pesto torta — a layered spread of garlic and herb cheeses, sun-dried tomato, tapenade (an olive and olive oil spread) and basil pesto — calamari fritti and steamed clams. The steamers, with their rich, garlic-flavored broth, were the highlight of the sampler. The lightly-fried calamari was also very good. The bruschetta, however, came up a bit short in comparison. The Roma tomato, garlic and pesto topping was full-flavored, but the bread could have been crispier.

Soup choices at Oregano's include baked minestrone, served from a crock and topped with melted provolone cheese, and zuppa toscana, a white bean soup. Salads include regular, chicken and salmon Caesars, a wilted spinach salad and a blue cheese garden salad. All pastas, entrees and pizzas are served with a well-portioned side Caesar. The dressing on our side salads, applied on the heavier side, was distinct — creamy, smooth and light on the garlic.

The pastas at Oregano's are varied and include everything from traditional spaghetti with meatballs to vegetarian lasagna. The entrees, which are all cooked in the restaurant's oak wood oven, are a bit

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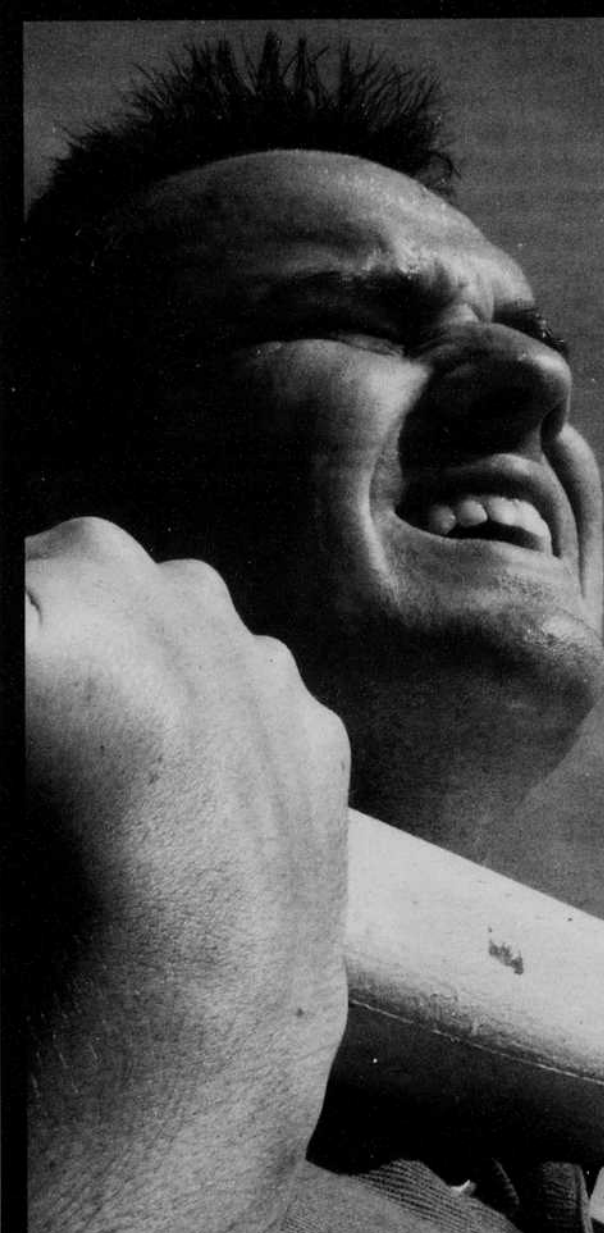
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