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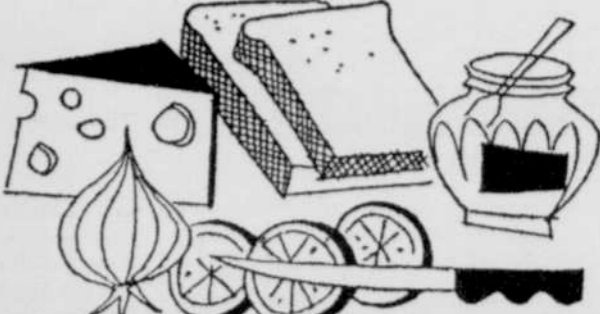
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BY MEG DALY

Home away from home

Vitis Enoteca • 535 N.W. 16th Ave.
Dana Giardina, the lesbian proprietor of Portland's best new Italian restaurant, has a signature dish that is badly made. And that's no insult.

Malfatti, Italian for "badly made," refers to raviolis run amok. The soft, uniform dumplings made of bread crumbs, chard, parmesan cheese and egg and topped with Bolognese sauce are a family tradition for Giardina. She grew up in Napa Valley, Calif., where her grandmother and aunt had started a family business selling their specialty dumplings straight from their cooking pot into yours.

When the family business was recently sold, it became all the more important to Giardina to realize her dream of starting a restaurant. Not just any restaurant, though. She wanted to create a European-style place where people would stay and linger over their food for hours, where a relaxed familia feel floated in the air.

The result is Vitis Enoteca, tucked away on the lower level of a warehouse building on Northwest 16th and Hoyt. The L-shaped layout with an open, inviting bar in the center and chocolate-colored walls lends itself to a cozy, intimate mood while at the same time feeling airy and urban. But the atmosphere is just a backdrop for the incredible tapas-style dishes and exquisite wine list.

We started our meal with salads that were more like savory ambrosia. The simple mixed green salad sparkled on the tongue with grated pecorino cheese and a lemony house vinaigrette. Seasonal sliced persimmon topped with cured ham nearly melted in our mouths.

In the spirit of the evening, we ordered a number of small dishes and delighted in sharing. First out was the aforementioned malfatti, which was divinely badly made—I savored every bite. Next up were pork loins stuffed with greens and prosciutto and served with a tomato tapenade. The special wild mushroom ravioli was a highlight, perfectly cooked and delicately flavored so the earthiness of the fungi was at its fullest. We also enjoyed the lamb chops rubbed in mint and accompanied by an olive tapenade. Bruschetti rounded out our meal; the grilled bread was topped with three different spreads: white bean and prosciutto, pureed squash, and shrimp and scallop.

For dessert (yes, we saved room), a delicious, bittersweet chocolate tart had us gasping for air. And a lovely pomegranate gelato added a fresh flourish to the end of the meal.

My advice: Become a regular! This is the kind of dining room away from home one longs for. Plus, Dana and her partner, Jacalyn Thompson, are great hosts and deserve support from their queer sisters and brothers.

By the way, rumor has it Vitis will be starting an after-hours club for the ladies Saturdays in the new year. Giardina has hired Diva mastermind Katharine Sprecher to get the party off its feet—so we know it will be stylish, sassy and fun! Check it out first and third Saturdays starting Jan. 15.

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