

Armen Kevrekian

PHOTO BY JAMES BATEMAN

Ambrosia

A homecoming memoir.

For me, as for many Eugeneans, coming back to Ambrosia is like coming back to a little bit of home. Much of it seems the same – warm, cozy, welcoming – but some aspects feel strange. I have changed, but I can still sense the bond between the then and the now.

In 1986, when Ambrosia opened its doors, I was part of her management (floor manager) but I talked the owners — Frank Ernandes, Zareh Marashlian, Armen Kevrekian — into allowing me to develop the restaurant's wine cellar and wine list. I promised that if they'd let me spend a bucketful of their money, Ambrosia would offer a wine list that would gain national publicity with an Award of Excellence from the widely read *Wine Spectator*. They agreed, and I went into their pockets up to my elbows, buying like a fiend. The Award of Excellence soon followed; the pattern was set, and the awards have come each year for 13 years.

When I come back, I scan the wines first: The list is still strong, still stressing Italian wines (for the food), Northwest (for our region) and California (neighborliness). Still major bargains in vintage ports.

Then I look around, eye the old brick walls, absorb the heart-warmth of lovely antique tables, chairs, and lamps under the white, stamped-tin roof. Check stairs I ran a thousand times to upper-level tables. The huge, hand-carved bar and back-bar still stun me, imagining their long ship-borne trip in the late 19th century, from the East Coast, around the tip of Tierra del Fuego, landing at last on the West Coast, coming to rest in Oregon, here. Across from the bar, in an open kitchen, the dark brick front of the wood-fired oven winks with one hot-red eye; aromas of baking pizzas and calzones suffuse the air. Everywhere plants, everywhere art, Italian pottery, the lively clutter of a beloved homestead.

I met my wife, the beautiful Kat, in this place; our first dinner date we sat at Table One, Section One. I carried our youngest daughter, Dana, still in diapers, through the kitchen. Waves of memories roll through my mind, wash up behind my eyes.

So much of Ambrosia is still top-shelf: The food is still consistently excellent, because the two main chefs who opened the place are still cooking. Chef Dave Proctor anchors the night kitchen; he came over from Excelsior, brought high skills and an almost magical touch with fresh fish, especially halibut (omigod). Chef Amedee Smith still cooks the lunches; he, too, came

from Excelsior, brought strength, speed, imagination, a deft feel for pastas. Both cherish food with flavor, color, texture. Both demand the finest ingredients. Amedee says, "The spirit is good." Both are smart and funny and twisted in peculiar ways (Amedee is a published poet — 'nuff said; Doc Proc, as we call him, is one of this area's most skilled Alfa Romeo mechanics, got shoulders on him like a couple of beer kegs). Desserts are crafted by Jan Wooley and Linda Spear, so talented, Jan also from (uh-huh) Excelsior; their pastries are pleasing to the eye, simple but intensely flavorful, in the Italian style.

But Ambrosia is also changing in these changing times. Long-time General Manager Clive Wanstall has moved on to Lane Community College; Amedee Smith has taken overall management duties. Owner/partner Armen Kevrekian will focus on wine while Frank Ernandes — a genuine gentleman and proud Italian — steps in as managing partner. Zareh Marashlian is busy with Portland's exotic Touché (fine food, pool and billiards in the Pearl). One of Mr. Ernandes's first moves has been to reduce prices on key menu items (and wines), to make the menu more accessible to families and young people who have always been the target clientele. Popular Spaghetti alla Bolognese, for example, will be priced at \$9.50. Wood oven-cooked pizzas and calzones range from \$7.50-\$10.95. The lunch menu offers an Ambrosia Burger with jalapeño jack cheese and spicy mustard for \$7.95; every day, the kitchen roasts a fresh bird for the turkey sandwich. On Sunday and Monday nights, talented new Chef Ico "Jimmy" Hiatt prepares special Italian-style three-course dinners — this week, Beer-poached clams in hefeweizen-butter sauce, then wild mushroom ravioli tossed in browned butter w/ lemon and parsley, entree choice of pork chop w/ pomegranate bourbon sauce or salmon w/ cucumber dill sour cream sauce, all for \$16, a yard-sale price.

In Eugene, any restaurant that manages to thrive for nearly 17 years deserves the sobriquet "venerable," but this elegant lady gains charm with age. She feels less upscale, more upbeat, still delivers Old World style and quality but with New World pizzazz, like the folks pumped up the house when the kids left for college. Frank Ernandes is passionate about Ambrosia's goals: "We strive to combine two great arts, the art of wine and the art of food, to create one of life's greatest pleasures."

Feels so nice to come home to.

EW

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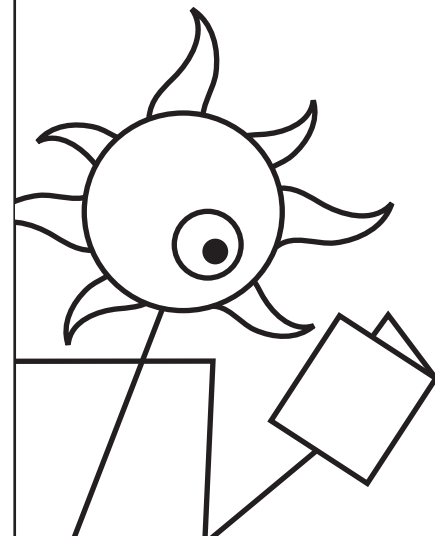
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