

Val 21: It's every bit as good as they say

By Jim Wood

EXAMINER FOOD AND WINE CRITIC

FOR ABOUT SIX months unspecific rumors have been rumbling out of the Mission District about a fantastic new restaurant. People who called me on the telephone usually said something to the effect that they couldn't really describe the place but that it was very special. They loved the food, the ambiance, everything.

It turns out these fans were being understated. Val 21, at 995 Valencia St. near 21st, is one those places you dream about: The food is deliciously creative; the ambiance relaxed; the service just about perfect; prices reasonable. More than anything, Val 21 reminded me of Chez Panisse just before it became world famous.

You enter through what looks like a store front, a door or two from the corner, and immediately you're struck by what a nice room it is. The tables are spaced for reasonable privacy, the bare wood floors are scrupulously polished, the walls match the round, green tables. There are no tablecloths, but the hammered silver is wrapped in an attractive cloth napkin. The customers appear to be a

good cross-section of the neighborhood. If anyone was wearing a necktie I didn't see it, but it's the kind of restaurant where no one would care. I saw a couple taking Mom to dinner, women sitting unhassled and alone, family groups, friends. It was all very comfortable; people drawn to a pleasant venue for some really amazing food.

With the exception of some deliberately cold soup, which I didn't think worked, everything I tried was exceptionally delicious. The best appetizer sounded the most implausible. We were eating with Chinatown activist Rose Pak, and with conscious irony she ordered Hoisin Basted Baked Egg Rolls. In fact, they were sensational. They contained shrimp, bean sprouts, mint, cilantro, carrots and red bell pepper and were served with an orange tamari dipping sauce.

There was just a little bit of each ingredient in the rolls, so the principal taste was just freshness. Because they were baked, there was no greasiness. The dipping sauce was perfect, adding a whole new dimension to the rolls. They were very light, you got enough to make your taste buds sing, and it was one of those dishes that was so good you didn't want it to be over. What a great way to start a meal.

ANOTHER SUPER appetizer was a little pizza, which the menu warns you to allow 10 minutes for. The atmosphere is so pleasant at Val 21 you don't notice the wait, but if you want this appetizer (and someone at your table should be sure to order it), you should put in your order before proceeding to the wine list. The crust is coarse, rough textured and tasty. You enjoy the taste in contrast with many pizzas around town where the crust is little more than a bland container for the topping. The filling is sliced, fresh; Roma tomatoes, kalamata olives (pits removed), and Asiago and sheep's milk cheeses. Each flavor is separate, but they combine perfectly. I had the pizza with a bit of chilled Honig 1990 Sauvignon Blanc and the combination was perfect.

The soup du jour, a thick, chilled avocado served with a bit of creme fraiche swirled over the top, was OK but not up to the quality of the other two appetizers.

THE ENTREES that I sampled at Val 21 were dynamite, absolutely great. Blackened chicken with chipotle aioli is served with vegetable black bean salsa, fried plantains and brown rice. The plantains are perfect with the chicken; their sweetness balances out the salsa and the aioli, a perfect combination (\$12.25).

Equally good was Moghuli stuffed chicken breasts with curry orange glaze. The breasts were stuffed with slivered almonds and currents with Indian spices. The dish was baked in yogurt and served with minted couscous. Absolutely delicious (\$12.75).

I would also highly recommend lime-ginger marinated prawns with pesto, served with tangerine black beans, roasted tomato salsa and brown rice. When the plate arrived in front of me, each of the ingredients was separate, so I could judiciously dip into one, then the other, with each bite. But they all tasted so good I found myself mixing them in little experiments, a little more of this to balance that. All of it was delicious, the prawns (shrimp?) perfectly cleaned, perfectly cooked, the flavorings tangy and sharp. Super.

The desserts are light, sweet and lovely. Ask your server.

VAL 21

► **LOCATION:** 995 Valencia St. near 21st

► **PHONE:** (415) 821-6622

► **HOURS:** Dinner, Sunday through Thursday, 5:30 to 10 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 5:30 to 11 p.m. Brunch, Saturday and Sunday, 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. Lunch, Monday through Friday, 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.

► **RESERVATIONS:** Yes

► **PARKING:** Not bad on street

► **WHEELCHAIR ACCESS:** Yes

► **AMBIANCE:** A very pleasant, easy-going place. Informal without being sloppy. Good art work. Lots of space between tables. Service is friendly and the food superb

► **RECOMMENDED DISHES:** Hoisin basted egg rolls, tiny pizzas, blackened chicken with chipotle aioli, Moghuli stuffed chicken breasts with curry orange glaze, lime ginger marinated prawns with pesto

► **COST:** \$

► **COMMENT:** The rumors are true. There's a wonderful new restaurant in the Mission District and it's called Val 21

The Examiner's price-rating system follows:

\$ Inexpensive (less than \$15 a person for dinner, exclusive of drinks, tax and tip)

\$\$ Moderate (\$15 to \$35 a person)

\$\$\$ Expensive (more than \$35 a person)