

SAN FRANCISCO BAY
GUARDIAN
APRIL 29, 1992 • VOL. 26, NO. 30 THE BAY AREA'S BEST...EVERY WEEK

VEGGIEZ 'N THE 'HOOD

BY JANET HAZEN

IT SEEMS EVERY time I turn around there's a new hip place on Valencia Street. Whether it's a cafe, bar, performance club, restaurant, or bookstore, the 'hood is jammin'.

One of the most recent additions to the area is an appealing semi-upscale restaurant: Val 21, obviously named after the location. This popular, culturally diverse dinner house provides a colorful, relaxed, and engaging atmosphere for locals. My friend described the decor as similar to that of eateries located around Melrose Avenue in Los Angeles. My eyes lit up when I heard this; the Inner Mission isn't exactly avant-garde when it comes to restaurant design.

Val 21's menu emphasizes vegetables and whole foods — without being a "health food" restaurant. Of course, there are plenty of offerings for vegetarians.

We started our first meal with three pancakes made from grated zucchini bound with garbanzo bean flour and spiked with Indian spices (\$5.75). A mango chutney laced with fresh mint accompanied the golden brown pancakes; it was refreshing and luscious. Warm spinach salad (\$6.50) was superb: Nicely prepared baby spinach leaves and delicate strips of red cabbage served as the base for this flavorful salad, with crunchy toasted almonds, Kalamata olives, and bits of aged ricotta cheese acting as accents. An excellent olive oil and sherry vinegar elevated this salad to even greater heights.

Spinach-herb gnocchi paired with potato-rosemary gnocchi

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(\$10.25) proved to be a fine peasant-style dish. The robust flavors of rosemary, Kalamata olives, and fresh yellow and red tomatoes were delightful, but the gnocchi were quite heavy. Gnocchi are difficult to make, even for the most accomplished chef. I don't fault the kitchen for serving these hefty gnocchi; the accompanying ingredients were lively and fresh — and certainly the price was right.

The special one evening was salmon with yogurt-cucumber sauce (\$12). Orzo and sautéed watercress were served with the salmon, which came rare in the center. While the flavors were light and healthful, I would have preferred a little less sauce and fewer cucumbers — there was a lot going on in this dish. A heavenly bottle of 1988 Guenoc Estate Petite Sirah (\$24) was divine with all of our choices.

On our second visit, we sampled a light caramelized onion tart (\$5.50) made with sweet red onions and feta. The crust was delicate and scented with caraway. An excellent salad dressed with a superior vinaigrette accompanied the thin tart.

Mexican-spiced free-range chicken (\$12.25) came with nutty-tasting brown rice, creamy avocado salsa, and piping hot fried plantains. The juicy, sliced chicken breast, rubbed with spices, was served atop a first-rate chipotle-spiked mayonnaise. Each component was flawless and delicious.

Idaho trout coated with cornmeal and served with a creamy lime-cilantro sauce (\$11.95) was also wonderful. Unusual yucca pancakes enlivened with cilantro and hot chilies and a piquant red cabbage "slaw" were served with the fish.

For dessert we had a lovely steamed chocolate pudding served warm in a pool of berry sauce (\$4.50).

Val 21's wine list is well balanced and reasonably priced. A bot-

tle of 1989 Honig Sauvignon Blanc (\$17) was good with our second meal.

It was a treat to be surrounded by a staff that appears to be having a good time. Everyone was professional, efficient, and competent. What a pleasant treat! I have nothing but praise for Val 21 — the food is terrific, the decor is stunning, and the service is charming and down-to-earth without being lackluster or too casual. Chefs Barr Hogan and Tai Leavitt are doing a fine job. I'd like to make this one of my regular spots, and it looks as if the neighborhood has embraced Val 21 with the same gusto. Note: Val 21 will be open for lunch beginning May 4.

Val 21, 995 Valencia (at 21st St.), SF, (415) 821-6622. Lunch: Mon.-Fri., 11:30 am-2:30 pm. Dinner: Sun.-Thurs., 5:30-10:30 pm; Fri.-Sat., 5:30-11 pm. Brunch: Sat.-Sun., 10 am-3 pm. MasterCard, Visa. Reservations accepted. No-smoking section. Wheelchair accessible.