

BAR BITES: Astaria

Mandy Erickson

Thursday, March 27, 2008



Most **restaurant** bars are merely a stopping point for diners waiting for a table. But at **Astaria** in downtown San Mateo, the **restaurant's** bar is a destination in itself - especially on Thursday nights, when there's live music. I Noah Band, Margo LeDuc and Tony Lindsay of Santana regularly play R&B with jazz and Motown overtones, with other groups rotating in on occasion. Most fans sit and listen while sipping cocktails and snacking at the bar, but a daring few will take a turn on the small dance floor. Celebrate the weekend one night early, as you have only Friday to get through.

The vibe: A casual but energetic crowd willing (or looking) to meet new people. Groups of friends lean across the bar to chat with new acquaintances.

The crowd: Everyone from professionals in their 30s to seniors; most are casually dressed.

Best seat: If you want to relax and enjoy the music, park yourself on one of the couches or comfy armchairs next to the bar. If you're interested in meeting people, grab a bar stool for a view of the crowd.

Killer app: Spanakopita (\$8), with crisp, melt-in-your-mouth phyllo wrapper, is so fresh the spinach and cheese flavor shine. Med kebabs (two skewers for \$12) of ground lamb and beef are juicy, rare and only slightly spicy. The Italian sausage, ginger and citrus spring rolls (\$12) work surprisingly well, as the spicy pork sausage effectively complements the ginger and hints of orange.

Signature drink: The specialty cocktails (all \$9) include a beautiful lavender-colored **Astaria** Night with Van Gogh acai-blueberry vodka, pineapple juice and fresh lime. It's fragrant and fruity without being medicinal. The blood orange cosmo, with Absolut Mandarin, is slightly tarter than the regular cosmo. Chilled Pear, with Grey Goose pear-flavored vodka, Apple Pucker and a splash of orange juice, is full of pear flavor.

Also on tap: Dozens of wines by the glass (\$7 to \$12), draft and bottled beer (including non-alcoholic).

Bonus: Happy hour runs through the weekend: Every day from 4 to 6:30 p.m., cocktails are \$5.75, draft beer is \$3 and appetizers are half price.

Vitals: 50 E. Third Ave. (at San Mateo Drive), San Mateo. (650) 344-9444, www.astariasm.com. Open until 9 p.m. Sun.-Thurs., 9:30 Fri.-Sat. Music from 7:30-10 p.m. Thurs.

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