

Pleasant Astaria flickers star potential

Dave Murphy, Chronicle Staff Writer

Friday, September 3, 2004

Once you see the wicker stars hanging at the front of Astaria in San Mateo, you'd swear you know how to pronounce its name. But you'd be wrong. It rhymes with "hysteria," a condition that can be both exciting and frustrating.

And boy, does that fit Astaria.

Make no mistake: It's good -- even better than the Lark Creek Cafe, which occupied the space inside the Benjamin Franklin Hotel for seven years. The people are nice, the setting pleasant and the food well-prepared.

But it's not a star yet. That's where the frustration comes in. Astaria has the potential to be one of the best restaurants on the Peninsula, but the excitement is tempered because of missteps by servers and chefs. It lacks the consistency of an elite restaurant.

Alicia Petrakis and Eleni Lolas had a San Mateo catering business called Astaria for eight years before opening the Mediterranean restaurant last fall. Their experience in accommodating a wide range of tastes comes through in the menu, which has the obligatory moussaka and souvlaki, but also includes crab cakes, French onion soup and pizza.

Salads, pizzas and many appetizer plates come in two sizes, making it easy to nosh through a meal. Don't miss the garlic grilled prawns (\$10.75) -- two skewers of three prawns apiece, on two slices of garlic bread. The garlic is relatively subtle, and the bread is so good that you'll want to turn your Atkins book into a Frisbee.

The Dungeness crab cakes (\$9.50) go well beyond ordinary, thanks to two aioli sauces, one with red pepper and another with lemon and thyme. The three cakes -- each about 2 inches in diameter -- are arranged on a lettuce leaf, an island surrounded by the red and yellow sauces.

Sauces are one of Astaria's strengths, and the kitchen uses them wisely. Just as the lettuce leaf gives diners the option of having an aioli-free crab cake, the garlic prawns dish includes a radicchio leaf filled with a stronger sauce, in case the prawns alone won't satisfy your garlic jones.

All the appetizers we sampled over the course of three visits were good, including the baked feta (\$4.95) and the tiropitas (\$4.50), three phyllo triangles stuffed with cheese and herbs. The souvlaki (\$10.50 for two kebabs) offers a choice of chicken, pork or lamb, and comes with pita and tzatziki, a yogurt mint sauce.

Although Astaria's emphasis is Mediterranean, the setting is eclectic. The L-shaped dining room hasn't changed dramatically since Lark Creek, with banquettes all around, four comfortable booths in front, an open kitchen in back and a lively bar. The background music tends to be American oldies rather than anything Greek, and the most popular drinks aren't ouzo or retsina, but colorful concoctions in martini glasses.

You might see servers ignite a saganaki appetizer, but the flaming cheese won't be accompanied by the sometimes artificially joyous shouts of "Opa!" as it often is in Greek places.

Missing the "Opa!" is hardly a big deal, but sometimes the service lacks a little oomph as well. On our first visit, a relatively quiet Sunday night, the first 15 minutes were both water-free and waiter-free. When our waiter finally did arrive, he immediately asked if we were ready to order rather than wasting his time on pleasantries.

On another visit, we ordered a salad with dressing on the side, but it arrived with no dressing at all. The server that night also never checked back with us after bringing our dishes to make sure everything was fine.

Those glitches stood out because Astaria's service otherwise was good; both waiters were friendly and helpful when we asked for recommendations. And on a Saturday night, when some restaurants falter, our server was excellent. Highly visible that night was Petrakis, one of the owners, who chatted with guests, served drinks and even cleared plates.

The kitchen also had a couple of sputters with specials on the other nights. A Gorgonzola bacon gratin on a filet mignon (\$23.95) complemented the flavor of the beef, but there wasn't enough of it to compensate for a very dry steak. A sea bass called psari mi skorthalia (\$19.95) was wonderful, but the side dish of skorthalia -- a potato puree -- had too much garlic for anyone who wasn't planning on kissing an IRS agent that evening. Or that month.

A seared wild salmon panzanella (\$19.95) also worked well, as did the moussaka (\$14.95). Even better was the lamb shanks Ellinas (\$21.95), tender enough to eat with a fork and served in a red wine and tomato sauce on a bed of orzo risotto.

Astaria shows some originality in combining ingredients in pizzas and salads, such as its small summer pizza (\$8.95) of peach and Serrano ham; the peach didn't overpower the ham, as pizzeria pineapple often does. A Sonoma salad (\$8.95) had a typical mix of organic greens, Gorgonzola and pecans, but also included smoked bacon and roasted beets. Roasting the beets changed their character so that they more than held their own.

If you like fruit in your salad, you might opt for the spring salad (\$8.50), which includes strawberries, toasted walnuts, crumbled feta and organic greens. As with all salads, you can get a small one for \$2 less, or add grilled chicken (\$4.50) or seared salmon (\$7.95).

Desserts were a microcosm of Astaria's performance. The baklava (\$5.95) was overwhelmed by cinnamon, and the chocolate spring rolls (\$5.95) were merely OK. But the seasonal fruit crisp (\$6.75) had a nice mixture of blackberries, blueberries and strawberries, although it would have bordered on being too dry without adding ice cream (\$1.50).

The star dessert, literally and figuratively, was the Astaria brownie (\$6.50), a star-shaped brownie on vanilla ice cream, covered with a warm chocolate ganache. All right, if you throw out your food thesaurus it's a hot fudge brownie sundae, but the brownie is moist and the ganache will make you go gaga.

If you're a chocolate lover and you finish with that, you'll go away happy. And you just might pronounce Astaria a success.

E-mail Dave Murphy at dmurphy@sfchronicle.com.

ASTARIA

50 E. Third Ave. (near El Camino Real), San Mateo, (650) 344-9444

Lunch 11:30 a.m. -2:30 p.m. daily; brunch 10 a.m. -2:30 p.m. Saturday-Sunday; dinner 5-9 p.m. Sunday-Thursday, until 9:30 p.m. Friday-Saturday.

Reservations and credit cards accepted. Full bar. Valet parking at dinner \$6, with validated parking for nearby lot at lunch; street parking relatively easy for dinner.

Overall: TWO STARS
Food: TWO STARS
Service: TWO STARS
Atmosphere: TWO AND A HALF STARS

Prices: \$\$
Noise: THREE BELLS

Pluses: Variety of well-prepared items, especially seafood, lamb and appetizers. Garlic prawns and Astaria brownie sundae stand out. Friendly service.

Minuses: Inconsistency in both the food and service.

=====

RATINGS KEY

FOUR STARS: Extraordinary
THREE STARS: Excellent
TWO STARS: Good
ONE STAR: Fair
(box): Poor

.
\$ Inexpensive: entrees under \$10
\$\$ Moderate: \$10-\$17
\$\$\$ Expensive: \$18-\$24
\$\$\$\$ Very Expensive: more than \$25

Prices are based on main courses. When entrees fall between these categories, the prices of appetizers help determine the dollar ratings.

.
ONE BELL: Pleasantly quiet (under 65 decibels)
TWO BELLS: Can talk easily (65-70)
THREE BELLS: Talking normally gets difficult (70-75)
FOUR BELLS: Can only talk in raised voices (75-80)
BOMB: Too noisy for normal conversation (80+) .

Chronicle critics make every attempt to remain anonymous.
All meals are paid for by the Chronicle.
Star ratings are based on a minimum of three visits.
Ratings are updated continually based on a least one revisi t.