

10/31/08

ENTERTAINMENT

Vibrant Persian style cuisine at Fly Trap



Fly Trap couples unusual flavors in the large meatballs, including filling them with a whole stuffed quail.

SAN FRANCISCO – Last Monday night I walked into the Fly Trap — now owned and operated by Iranian chef Hoss Zaré — took a seat at the bar, and ordered a meatball. Reza, the bartender stared at me.

"It's a 2-pound meatball," he said. "Tonight, it has a whole stuffed quail inside it."

I pondered this unexpected turn. Rumors had been flying about Zaré's Monday meatball service, but who knew it would be a 2-pounder?

"Is it good?" I asked.

"It's fabulous," he said. "You can take the leftovers home. It makes a great sandwich."

While the monster was being prepared, I had a flowerlike butter lettuce salad (\$10), the leaves broken apart, dressed in tarragon-scented vinaigrette and reassembled.

Reza, who introduced himself as the mixologist, made me feel at home. He poured me a glass of pretty Spanish tempranillo (\$9) and gave me tastes of the intricate, well-balanced cocktails (\$10) he carefully measured out.

The meatball arrived, a huge sphere of moist ground veal lightened with rice, perched in a flat bowl of clear, flavorful broth. When I broke the meatball open, the aroma of saffron and sweet spices wafted up, and a whole boned quail appeared. I cut into it and a delicately sweet stuffing of barberries and chestnuts poured out. Every morsel of the quail was succulent. I spooned torshi — a tart Persian vegetable relish — into the bowl, which completed the dish.

Though I was full, I couldn't resist a yogurt panna cotta (\$9), bracingly tangy but sweetened with a spoonful of thick honey and accompanied with an exciting paper-thin biscotti.

At home the next day, two of us polished off the meatball. Though it cost \$25, the meatball delivered three luscious meals.

I liked everything about this new Persian-accented Fly Trap, especially the warmth and personal involvement of the staff. The decor of the previous incarnation — pressed tin ceiling, copper framed etchings as wall covering, dark wood tables and wooden floors — remains pretty much the same, though white salad, celery Victor and chicken Jerusalem have disappeared from the menu.

Now the kitchen prepares dishes such as a light and refreshing smoked trout salad with "noodles" of cucumber in creamy, tart dressing (\$11), and richer, more ethnic fare, such as roasted eggplant slices smothered in saffron-scented yogurt sauce studded with walnuts, garnished with a pile of fried onion threads (\$10).

A voluptuous, fork-tender lamb shank with shell beans and potatoes, comes with that vibrant torshi on the side (\$24), and a buttery, long-cooked beef short rib on the bone in intense reduced sauce (\$23) will satisfy meat lovers.

Save room for desserts (\$9) conceived by consulting pastry chef Marisa Churchill. They're modern, exotic and really delicious. A deconstructed lemon "pie" of little piles of bright lemon curd, buttery graham cracker crumbs, coconut meringue and coconut-Persian lime sorbet tastes like a dream.

Before I ate there, I thought the conjunction of a historic San Francisco restaurant with a Persian-accented kitchen sounded weird. Now I get it. The Fly Trap is still a clubhouse where patrons eat, drink and schmooze all day long. Frankly, I like the new menu better because it offers more provocative though hearty dishes featuring local products. Not coincidentally, Zaré opened the current location of this 100-year-old restaurant in 1986 as head chef. Now he has made the Fly Trap his own.

Patricia Unterman is author of the San Francisco Food Lovers' Pocket Guide and a newsletter, Unterman on Food.

pattiu@concentric.net.

Fly Trap

Location: 606 Folsom St. (at Second Street), San Francisco

Contact: (415) 243-0580; www.zareflytrap.com

Hours: Monday through Friday, 11:30 a.m. to midnight; Saturday 6 p.m. to 1 a.m.

Price range: Starter \$8-\$14, entrees \$14 to \$26

Recommended dishes: The Monday meatball; braised Italian eggplant; butter lettuce salad; smoked-trout salad; lamb shank; braised short rib with marrow bone; yogurt panna cotta

Credit cards: All major

Reservations: Accepted