

The Farm Restaurant Review

By Penny E. Schwartz

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Chef Roberto Argentina can finally see the light of day.

The recent relocation of The Farm restaurant from the depths of the Cope Building on Citrus Avenue to an above-ground location on East State Street has given Argentina a literal and figurative breath of fresh air.

"My former kitchen was located so far in the back of the building that I could hear nothing from the restaurant," Argentina said. The new locale features a close-in kitchen with a long open counter through which the chef and his cooks can see diners' faces and feel the energy of the dining room. "It's great to see sunlight and people," Argentina says with a smile.

Diners can also see sunlight and people walking by the restaurant, especially if they choose to sit on the porch that fronts State Street. The Farm is located in the former home of Stell Coffee Shop, which maintained an accompanying presence for a while but has now consolidated its business efforts in its original Barton Road establishment.

The Farm still features Stell Coffee, but most physical traces of the State Street coffee house are gone. The claustrophobic booths with heavy wooden dividers have been removed and replaced with an airy arrangement

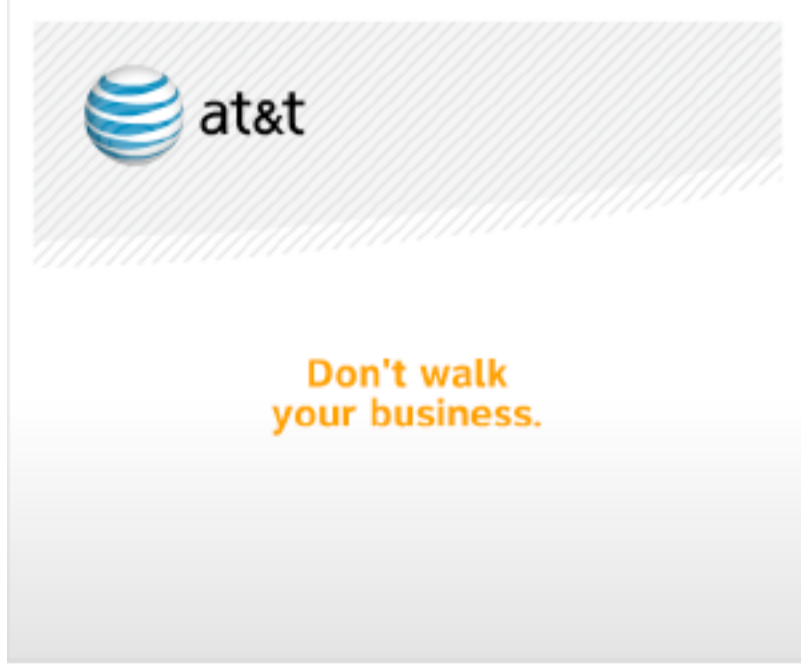
of dining tables throughout the long, narrow interior capped by an industrial ceiling. Lime green walls are hung with colorful paintings offered for sale by local artist Galit Breman. The interior is still a work in progress, Argentina says, with plans afoot to create a wine bar at the front of the restaurant.

The menu is a work in progress as well. While it is essentially the same as the one featured at The Farm's former location, Argentina says he is still "playing with it," working to make changes bit by bit.

What won't change, however, is the chef's commitment to "slow food," the use of locally grown ingredients and emphasis on the freshest possible fruits and vegetables.

Following the example of groundbreaking chef Alice Waters and others who make their magic with locally grown produce, Argentina buys vegetables raised in San Timoteo Canyon and serves artisanal cheeses produced in northern California. He has even convinced local growers to take a chance on heirloom tomatoes and other non-commercial produce that he

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uses in his kitchen. "Redlands has a big agrarian tradition," says Argentina, who seeks to connect diners with their agrarian surroundings.

"My cuisine is ingredient-based," says the chef, who offers specials based on whatever fresh items he finds at Redlands' Market Night or at other local markets, including the vegetable garden at the local Grove High School.

He developed his cooking style through his work with other chefs, notably former White House Chef Keith Luce of Spruce in Chicago and Joachim Splichal of Patina in Los Angeles. He is also an avid reader of books on cooking and admires the work of the French Laundry's Thomas Keller. "I am a food craftsman and try to execute as well as I can what I have learned in every kitchen I have worked in," says Argentina, who was born in Italy.

The influence of Redlands' Market Night was easy to see the night our party of four dined at The Farm since it was a Thursday, market evening. It seemed that half the population of Redlands was parading by, even though the night was hot and sticky.

Choosing privacy over people-watching, we opted for inside seating. Soon we were enjoying a basket of The Farm's home-made foccaccia and sourdough breads.

While some of us cooled down with a subtly flavored and refreshing blackberry iced tea, I chose a glass of St. Lucas 2002 Sauvignon Blanc from Argentina while another in our party selected a Frog's Leap Gamay Rose 2005 from Napa. A variety of wines by the glass are available, with the wine list offering bottles from France, New Zealand, Argentina, California and the Northwestern United States at reasonable prices.

Soon we were perusing the list of "Bocconcini" ("small bites"), which offer a variety of meal starters. True to The Farm's agrarian roots, our favorite was the grilled vegetable roll featuring asparagus, garbanzo beans and other veggies layered with red pepper coulis, olive tapenade, cream cheese and capers all rolled into a wrap. The combination of flavors from sweet to vinegary and textures from creamy to crunchy worked well; the presentation, with an asparagus spear bent over the top of the roll, was most pleasing.

In fact, a smorgasbord of flavors artfully arranged would describe many of Argentina's dishes. Positioning himself at the kitchen's vegetable and sauce station, he puts the finishing touches on the plates as they go to diners' tables.

Sauteed shrimp with flan of quinoa, a tiny grain popular in South America, was also a table favorite for appetizers. Another appealing starter was a homemade fettuccini bathed in tomato-basil sauce flavored with Humboldt Fog goat cheese from northern California. Less successful was the scallop, rather bland even though paired with soba noodles dressed in a creamy cauliflower sauce.

As a main course, the lamb rack was tender and flavorful, cooked perfectly to medium rare. A serving of lentils offered a pleasing textural counterpoint along with mashed potatoes and a delightful ratatouille of mixed vegetables. The filet mignon fared less well as it was overcooked to medium. Accompanying Portobello mushrooms married well with the steak, but their sauce overpowered the caper potatoes. A home-fried potato chip made a nice accent atop the steak.

The evening special, a pan fried snapper served with barely cooked asparagus, was bland and disappointing. The chicken breast with a buttery polenta, however, came accompanied by wonderful sautéed seasonal vegetables, including string beans from Grove High School, pearl onions, shallots, beets and fennel. These showcased Argentina's forte, fresh vegetables perfectly paired and artfully arranged for maximum visual appeal.

Since individual dessert items were running low by the time our meal was ending, the kitchen sent out a platter of assorted meal-enders. Best was the homemade lemon cake with chocolate ganache, turned out by the restaurant's pastry-chef-in-training. A flourless chocolate cake was creamy and rich, as was a coconut tart with caramel sauce.

In tandem with the décor and the main menu, the dessert offerings are also a work in progress. So a return to The Farm for further updates is definitely on the docket.

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Score card:

Ambience: ★★★★★
Food: ★★★★★
Service: ★★★★★

Stars are awarded on a one-to-five basis, with five being the highest.

Prices: Appetizers, \$7-14; main courses, \$20-29, with four and six-course chef's tasting menus available (to the entire table only) at \$45 and \$59 per person. Desserts, \$6.50.

Details: The Farm Restaurant, 22 E. State St., Redlands, (909) 792-1162. Open Tuesday through Saturday for lunch from 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. and for dinner from 5-9 p.m. Accepts all major credit cards except Discover.

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