



NICHOLAS GILMAN SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

Pizzas are "subtly creative" at L'Atelier.

L'ATELIER

BY NICHOLAS GILMAN
Special to The News

On a recent rainy night my friend Brad and I were strolling through Colonia Roma when the sound of Miles Davis' muted trumpet stopped us in our tracks. The music was wafting from the open doorway of an old house. The sign outside read Centro Cultural L'Atelier d'en Quim Jardí.

We climbed the narrow wooden staircase and, lo-and-behold, entered a Bohemian dream, circa 1959. What we found was a laid back, comfortable bistro, with great food and great music. The rambling collection of old rooms, filled with tables covered in checkered oilcloth, metal folding chairs (those Corona giveaways you see all over) and groovy art on the walls, made us feel right at home. Owner and chef Quim Jardí also runs La Rauxa, whose 85-peso set comida is one of the best kept secrets in the Condesa.

Jardí, of Catalán descent, is shy (according to his personable wife and business partner Laura) – that is, until he gets going on the topic of food. His passion about all things culinary started at an early age. His grandmother owned a Catalán restaurant here in Mexico, and Jardí would hang out there as a child soaking up the ambiance of the kitchen. Later, after living for a while in Barcelona learning every aspect of its culinary traditions, he returned to Mexico.

Plans to write about gastronomy did not fully satisfy his creative urge, so when a restaurant space in the Condesa became available, it was Laura (who also does the books – "I'm the practical one") who told him to stop talking and just do it, as she ex-

The rhythm is right and pizza is art at this Italo-Catalán bistro in La Roma

MORE INFO

Stop by this bistro for great food and great music!

L'Atelier d'en Quim Jardí

San Luis Potosí 121, corner Jalapa, Col. Roma
Tel: 5564-4722

Open: Monday - Friday, 4:30 - 11 p.m., Saturday 1 - 11 p.m.

Credit Cards: Visa, MasterCard

La Rauxa

Parras 15, Col. Condesa
Tel: 5211-2927

Open weekdays for comida only



Pastas are one of the specialties.

plained to me with a giggle. The lease for La Rauxa was signed on a Wednesday and the restaurant was open for business on Monday. That was two years ago. Not content with the success of that comida-only bistro, the new venue was borne.

This new spot, only open at

night, fulfills the Jardí's dream to run a European-style boite in Mexico City. The couple also plans to add a bookstore, and present live music, poetry readings and other cultural events. Meanwhile, the excellent "cocina del autor" ("author's cuisine") will have to do – it was enough to make me come back for a second try. The reasonably priced menu is mostly Italian. Pizzas, pastas and salads are the focal point (la "parilla" for grilling meats was being installed the last time I went).

But, oh!, what pizzas, pastas and salads. The intelligent and artful way in which these overly familiar offerings are prepared tempts me to hyperbolize. The influence of Catalonia sneaks up on you. The mundane Italian monikers are just a disguise for the creatively deconstructed Mediterranean-fusion cuisine.

The menu lists a number of standard sounding pizzas, but they are subtly creative. The crust of the pizza margarita we sampled was light, thin and crisp, the cheese farm-fresh and flavorful. But it was the appealingly sweet tomato sauce that was the surprise – it is, in fact, made from a Catalán recipe, caramelized onions providing the sweetness. I thought the "Miguel Ángel" pizza, with five different cheeses in its description, would be overly cheesy, but instead, it yields a complex series of flavors, due largely to the high quality of its ingredients.

The ample salads are discreetly dressed, the greens varied and seasonal. The chef rec-

ommended Ensalada Lyonnaise, a light meal in itself, its mustardy dressing marrying well with the fresh greens, bacon and poached egg and potato. The Caesar salad, often swamped in cloying dressing in Mexican restaurants, was one of the best I've had.

The house-made pasta is tagliatelle (a wider version of fettucini), so thin and flavorful that only a light sauce is necessary. The classic Italian pasta carbonara is often heavy, overwhelmed by ingredients all screaming for attention at the same time. Not here. A delicate tossing of parmesan, bacon and egg compliments the pasta instead of beating it up. Pasta with limone e salvia (lemon and sage) utilized these two aromatics advantageously. The Bolognese turns out to have made a pit stop in Barcelona, as the traditional reduced meat sauce is finished with a "sofrito" (fried in oil) of garlic, parsley and almonds – apparently a purely Catalán concept.

The chef is particularly proud of his wine list and believes that wines don't have to be expensive to be good. There is a well researched mix of Spanish, Argentine, Chilean and Mexican reds and some excellent "cavas" (Spain's sparkling white wine). The selection of wines for under \$300 pesos is a welcome surprise.

An unusual dessert we sampled, the peach Blumenthal Melba, is a light egg custard laced with bacon(!) – a blend ideas from two of Jardí's favorite masters: Escoffier, the classic 19th century French culinary artist, and today's British molecular gastronomist Heston Blumenthal, resulting in old world luxury with a mod twist-Nelly Melba never had it so good. Also on the dessert menu are both crème brûlée and crema catalana – two dishes I always thought were one and the same. Not so, but better you ask the chef to explain why in person.

Prices are reasonable: Dinner for two, with a glass of wine will be under 400 pesos.

And that music! The Jardis promise never to stoop to contemporary pop – Miles, Trane and Bird rule the roost here.

L'Atelier is so cool they don't have to spell it out for you.

It's for adults who like good food, good music, and the kind of ambiance I was afraid had disappeared.