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Mix-and-match Mediterranean

Mandy Erickson, Special to The Chronicle

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"IT'S A NICE ADDITION TO DOWNTOWN, ISN'T IT?" asserted a woman seated next to us at Mandaloun in Redwood City.

With a new multiplex cinema, gift stores and the revamped Art Deco Fox Theatre all within a couple of blocks, the city is hoping to draw a bigger nighttime crowd to its center. Mandaloun, which opened in October, has supplied a critical ingredient -- a superb new place to dine.

Mandaloun, Arabic for arched window, feels like a courtyard in a desert palace. The sand-colored walls are accented with large stones, archways separate the dining room from the bar and the open kitchen, and wrought-iron gates welcome diners into the foyer.

Summer enhancements

The courtyard effect will be even greater in summer, when management plans to start serving in a back patio and the foyer is open to the street. In winter, the front area is surprisingly cozy, protected as it is by a thick plastic sheet and heated by a fireplace.

The restaurant describes its cuisine as Mediterranean. That can be an iffy term, but it's appropriate here, as the dishes circle the sea, from Spain to Greece to Morocco. Chef David Breck Mann adds a California bent with churros for dessert, as well as local ingredients such as Meyer lemons and petrale sole.

With small plates, medium plates, pasta, pizza and entrees, Mandaloun also covers every appetite. A choice of three small plates for \$15 is plenty for lunch or dinner. One of the best is the salt cod and fries (\$6 a la carte), which arrives in a paper cone, the pinkie-size pieces of fish tossed in with the fries. Dipping sauces of caramelized onion-flavored oil, red pepper mayonnaise and shallot-infused vinegar all add delicious dimensions.

Grilled vegetables (\$5.50), including eggplant, portobello mushrooms, onions and bell peppers, are smoky and slightly caramelized. And the room-temperature grilled sardines (\$6.50) are well matched with Meyer lemon and peppery watercress, topped with pine nuts and currants.

The only disappointing small plate I encountered was the phyllo-wrapped Moroccan cigars (\$6), filled with a bland mix of ground chicken and herbs.

Medium plates

The menu's medium plates work as appetizers, too -- perhaps they're so named because they're slightly pricier. They include some terrific salads: Chioggia beet and fennel (\$7); baby lettuce, pear and walnut (\$7); and spinach with goat cheese (\$6). The well-balanced dressings stay in the background yet tie the ingredients together.

A nightly special of seafood and chorizo rice (\$14) is especially good, resembling a soupy paella, slightly spicy and tinted with saffron. The chorizo is chopped into bits, so it gets into every bite, and the shell-on shrimp, clams and mussels are all fresh from the ocean.

Vongole pizza (\$11), spread with a clam sauce thickened with chevre, then topped with shelled clams, spinach and red pepper is terrific, although it needs to be eaten quickly or the flavors lose their punch.

Pasta offerings

A special of orecchiette (\$8 half order; \$16 full) takes advantage of the winning cauliflower-cheese union, with multicolored cauliflower, pancetta and chunks of sharp cheddar. Tagliatelle (\$9; \$16) contained admirable ingredients -- pecorino, pork cheek guanciale, sweet chicory and woodsy mushrooms -- but it failed to create a whole.

All these small, medium and pasta or pizza plates can be mixed and matched for a great shared meal, but the entrees I tried at Mandaloun were standouts.

The rabbit (\$22) entree is something of a composed salad, with lemon-marinated roasted leg, fingerling potatoes, lightly grilled chanterelles, mini artichokes and turnips, al dente peas, tapenade and a little cube of braised pork belly. The contrasts of sweet meat and sour lemon, al dente vegetables and soft potatoes, pungent tapenade and fatty pork play off one another beautifully.

Swordfish (\$24) is tender and meaty, without a touch of fishiness, and grilled so it sports a crust reminiscent of a well-cooked steak. It sits atop a jumble of marrow beans, milk-braised salsify and minuscule carrots. The 20-ounce bone-in rib-eye (\$25) is priced better than those at many steakhouses and more expertly cooked, with a nearly charred, crisp exterior and juicy meat. The accompanying pommes Anna includes blue cheese, always a welcome complement to steak.

The kitchen sets a high bar, which unfortunately lowers at dessert (all \$6). While the churros, freshly fried and accompanied by an inviting chocolate-espresso dipping sauce, are terrific, and the chocolate terrine is so intense it's nearly a solid chocolate bar, the pear crisp contained too little pear and far too much crisp. The lavender-scented creme brulee carried no lavender flavor, and the molten cake barely tasted of chocolate.

The bulk of the wines on the list are Californian, although there are several from Italy, France, Spain and even Lebanon. Prices are moderate, and many are available by the glass.

Service was adequate on all my visits, although we did endure a few long waits. On one

visit, our waiter asked us four times within half an hour whether everything was OK, then disappeared when things got busy.

Still, Mandaloun, with its night-in-the-desert atmosphere and sampling menu, is a find -- and a welcome addition to the new downtown mix.

E-mail comments to food@sfchronicle.com.

Mandaloun

2021 Broadway (at Main Street), Redwood City; (650) 367-7974. 11:30 a.m.-10 p.m. Monday-Thursday; until 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday; 4-9 p.m. Sunday. Full bar. Reservations and credit cards accepted. Validated parking (2 hours) for nearby lot.

Overall: TWO AND A HALF STARS
Food: TWO AND A HALF STARS
Service: TWO STARS
Atmosphere: TWO AND A HALF STARS
Prices: \$\$\$
Noise Rating: THREE BELLS

Pluses: Appetizers to entrees are almost uniformly very good; menu lets you create your own meal from small plates, medium plates and entrees. Courtyard-like atmosphere is appealing and prices are reasonable.
Minuses: Several desserts are disappointing.

RATINGS KEY

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

\$ Inexpensive: entrees \$10 and under
\$\$ Moderate: \$11-\$17
\$\$\$ Expensive: \$18-\$24
\$\$\$\$ Very Expensive: more than \$25

Prices 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+)

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Star ratings are based on a minimum of three visits.
Ratings are updated continually based on a least one revisit.

