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Brix Wine Cafe: It takes a village to raise a glass

By **Providence Cicero**

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Jason Hammond pours wine for a couple of early customers at the cozy and welcoming Brix Wine Cafe near Juanita Beach.

Juanita Village is one of those high-density, mixed-use developments determined to inject some small-town charm into the suburban landscape. This Kirkland enclave has a distinctly European look. Low-rise apartment buildings and town houses sport colorful, variegated facades, some with balconies. Among the boutiques, salons and specialty stores lining the meandering, pedestrian-friendly streets are numerous spots to eat and drink — among them 6-month-old Brix Wine Cafe.

Brix anchors a corner of the building that houses the Chelsea, an apartment complex with hotel-like amenities that include an in-house theater and billiards room plus a 24-hour business center and fitness facility. With its Italian-influenced American bistro menu and upscale but relaxed ambience, the restaurant fits neatly into the developer's scheme. If I lived upstairs, I'd be a regular (and I'd need that round-the-clock exercise equipment, too).

Just a bowl of parsnip and sweet potato soup could draw me. Improbably lush and velvety for something made from knobby root vegetables, it's adorned with delicate celery root crisps good enough to be eaten on their own.

I'd go to Brix for fish, too, but I'd have a hard time choosing between cod and salmon. Both presentations follow the same construct: a base of greens layered with a starch and topped with fish. Crisscrossed with grill marks, the moist, well-seasoned salmon fillet is mounted on just-wilted spinach and chewy grains of farro, cooked risotto-style in a creamy sauce.

True risotto accompanies the expertly pan-fried cod. The white-wine-infused rice is pleasingly firm, its muted flavor complemented by the bacon bits and bitter flavors migrating from the lemon-dressed frisée salad.

This kitchen, led by executive chef Craig Stout, has a talent for frying. Both the burger (which I didn't try) and the pulled-pork sandwich (which I did) come with wonderful deep-fried potato nuggets. A kicky red cabbage slaw and pickled red pepper accompany the bounteous heap of sweet, supple pork as well.

There's not quite enough pickle in the pepper, but the sandwich's main drawback is too much padding from an oversized, though excellent, toasted bun.

The menu varies enough to appeal to a range of appetites and prices are moderate. Even steak is less than \$20. The boldly seasoned and grilled skirt steak is sliced to show off its bright pink center. The tender meat drapes a dense block of potato gratin, its layers fused with cheese and cream, its top toasted golden brown. Swiss chard, lightly sautéed with garlic, completes this hefty entree.

Look to starters for smaller plates and salads. Scallops are particularly striking: Those seared beauties appear to have skidded to a stop on a butter-slick runway of puréed potato, a stream of orange beurre blanc trailing in their wake. Rich macaroni and cheese is liberally laced with crabmeat (but it's not quite as luxurious as the root vegetable soup). Warm broccoli salad tastes like bagna cauda in a bowl; the crunchy stalks are bathed in garlic, anchovy and olive oil.

Several other salads come in either starter or entree sizes; diners also have the option of adding crabmeat, chicken or hanger steak to any salad for a few dollars more. Flatbread pizzas are another light option; the thin, brittle crust is appealing, but the mushroom, goat cheese and arugula combo was disappointingly bland.

Brix's bar is a draw, too. Contrary to the message sent by the restaurant's wine-cafe name and the dozens of wine bottles strikingly displayed against a pale stone wall behind the bar, Brix serves a full range of liquor and bartenders exhibit considerable cocktail prowess.

The bartenders showed a better grasp of the wine list than some of the servers on the floor. Though heavily Northwest-oriented, the list includes wines from California, France, Italy and Australia as well. I wished for a more diverse choice by the glass; reds vastly outnumber whites, and too many of those are chardonnay. Wine flights are not very inspired either.

I also wished the cheese plate had more cheese and less fruit; the chilled plate was fine for the ripe pear and pile of plump, juicy roasted red grapes, but it did no favors for the four meager morsels of cheese.

Desserts follow the trail of comfort food blazed by the rest of the menu: nutty, gooey, warm chocolate brownie topped with ice cream; poached pear tucked into a nest of sweet puff pastry under a blanket of vanilla whipped cream.

It's easy to like Brix. The food is good and there's a breezy conviviality about the service.

The convex dining room feels spacious and elegant thanks to scrolling metalwork, towering wine racks and tall windows hung with soft drapes. But there's a cozy casualness afoot, too. People drop in for drinks with friends, have dinner with the kids or book the private room for parties. They settle into booths or banquettes or at the bar as if it were the neighborhood's great room.

Every village should have one.

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