

BTC's café seems too good to be true

JOHN STARK - THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

BELLINGHAM - On my consumer protection blog, I regularly repeat the old cliché: If it's too good to be true...

Well, how about oysters on the half shell for \$3.95, or Ellensburg double lamb chop with macadamia coconut crust and star anise sauce for \$7.95? Those and similar impossible bargains can be found on the menu at Café Culinaire, the restaurant staffed by the 55 students enrolled in Bellingham Technical College's Culinary Arts Program. Nothing on the menu is more than \$7.95.

In a way, it really IS too good to be true. The restaurant serves lunch only, just three days a week, Wednesday through Friday, and the term ends June 4. Seating is limited, and there is no wine. Perhaps BTC can add a sommelier training program in the not-too-distant future.

BTC spokeswoman Marni Saling Mayer says 55 students are enrolled in the program, with another 96 on the waiting list. The school keeps café prices rock-bottom to insure that every lunch is packed, to give both chefs and servers training in providing a fine dining experience in a bustling environment. Student lab fees cover the cost of the ingredients, and the labor is, of course, free. In fact, the students are paying to be trained in the program.

On our recent visit, we would have handed out "A"s to everyone concerned.

We began our meal with the oysters-four nice-sized bivalves. Two were chilled, with an Asian mignonette sauce, and two hot with the classic chopped-spinach Rockefeller approach. They were both professional-grade, although I've never quite understood the whole oysters Rockefeller thing. I much preferred the chilled ones that let the seafood shine through.

Then it was on to curried-crustured Hawaiian ono on a bed of Asian greens with red ginger-soy vinaigrette, \$3.95, and a salad of local field greens, Silver Springs goat gouda, Asian pears, smoked bacon, fennel seed lavosh, oven-dried tomatoes and hazelnut-cider vinaigrette, \$2.95.

The ono preparation showcased this subtly-flavored, halibut-like fish on a bed of greens that were delightful in themselves. And the salad also sparkled. Baby greens and vinaigrette are almost a cliché in the better local restaurants, but the café's version escaped the predictable with its clever combination of sweet, tart and earthy flavors.

The prices here do encourage overeating. We could not pass up smoked duck potstickers with orange-chili plum sauce, \$3.95, before moving on to main dishes of braised Twisted S Ranch buffalo short ribs in spicy molasses mop sauce, \$7.95, and brochette of Alaskan weathervane scallops and halibut on fresh soba noodles with spicy Asian pesto.

The potstickers had a nicely-herbed filling with a well-balanced sauce, with enough peppery zing to enliven the dish without overpowering the more subtle flavors. The ribs, served rare, were surprisingly tender and juicy. The skewers of seafood were nicely-broiled. My companion thought the scallops were a bit overcooked, but they seemed fine to me. I didn't think much of the heavy, earthy soba noodles, but the pureed carrots and spaetzle that came with the ribs were treats in themselves and a perfect supporting cast for the ribs.

An earnest young chef came out of the kitchen to make sure his work was satisfactory.

P.S. If you don't tip generously here, you should be ashamed of yourself.