

## CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

# A vintage experience

- Upstairs 2, which sits atop a wine emporium, is a West L.A. find.

By S. Irene Virbila, Times Staff Writer

Public relations execs are in the business of hyperbole. On press releases, a chef who once spent a week in a French three-star kitchen is billed as having cooked there. In their bios, line cooks morph into sous-chefs and sommeliers who have passed the first of many hurdles on the way to becoming a master sommelier find themselves elevated to full status. A hole-in-the wall pasta joint is declared a trendy Hollywood *boîte*. And celebrity sightings — real or imagined — are reported breathlessly.

These days a restaurant that opens without a PR blurb is about as rare as a model who doesn't whiten her teeth. And yet here's Upstairs 2, which quietly, almost stealthily, opened three weeks ago. This new restaurant and wine bar can dispense with the hype for hire, because it already has a built-in clientele; i.e., all the customers for the Wine House downstairs, including regulars at the wine shop's wildly popular wine classes and tastings, which are now held upstairs in the restaurant.

Open just three evenings a week — Thursday, Friday and Saturday, from 5:30 p.m. until 1 a.m. — Upstairs 2 is more than the simple wine bar I assumed it would be. Call it a wine restaurant with an appealing menu of Mediterranean small plates and 45 wines by the taste, glass or carafe. The chef is Todd Barrie, formerly of Joe's in Venice.

Wine House owner Bill Knight is the driving force behind the restaurant, and he's having a ball going from table to table greeting customers and presiding over his new toy. Designed by Lynne Miyake, the look is polished and urban, definitely not rustic, with handsome banquettes and a small bar. On the other side of the kitchen is a posh private room that seats 20.

On a Friday night, the place is packed: Riedel wineglasses etched with the number 2 cover each and every table. The bottom of the 2 marks the 2½-ounce pour; the upper part of the number marks the 6-ounce level. Or you can also order wines by the 375-milliliter (half-bottle) carafe, also Riedel. Another option is to buy a bottle of wine in the shop downstairs and drink it up here for a very reasonable \$10 corkage fee.

Knight says he's put his two best wine salesmen on as wine stewards. That must be why the wine service is so informed and smart. The choices are an eclectic bunch. You can start with a Nigl Grüner Veltliner from Austria or a Melville Viognier or a premier cru Chassagne Montrachet from Burgundy producer Colin

Deleger. Reds include Fattoria Le Pupille Morellino di Scansano from Italy, Arnoux's earthy Savigny-les-Beaune and Lebanon's Chateau Musar. Prices are very fair, so you can afford to drink up.

What's to eat? First of all, house-roasted Marcona almonds and olives, platters of charcuterie, and house-cured boquerones (white anchovies) on slices of tomato drizzled with tarragon oil. We tried one of the flatbreads, this one topped with duck confit and dried tomatoes, which disappeared in a flash, it was so delicious.

Although everything is billed as small plates, some are more substantial than others. I loved the Spanish butter beans with braised escarole and Catalan butifarra sausage. Dates wrapped in serrano ham made a tasty bite. The fluffy lamb meatballs are a good match for one of the supple, lighter-bodied reds. And five-pepper-crusting rib-eye steak is an excellent piece of beef.

We must have had a dozen different dishes over a couple of hours, which means we didn't even make it through half the dishes. The idea is to change the menu every month to six weeks to keep it fresh. The same goes for the wine list.

In this part of L.A. — where the 10 meets the 405 — there's nothing like this relaxed and congenial wine bar and restaurant.

All this, and reasonable prices: Four of us had three carafes of wine and a lot of food, yet the bill came to scarcely \$50 a person, which is a rare bargain these days.

It's a beautiful thing, too, that Upstairs 2 has 70 parking spaces, so they can dispense with valet parking. What an idea!

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## **Upstairs 2**

**Where:** 2311 Cotner Ave., L.A.

**When:** 5:30 p.m. to 1 a.m. Thursdays through Saturdays. (Kitchen closes at 12:30 a.m.) Full bar. Lot parking in back.

**Price:** Cold dishes, \$5 to \$11; hot dishes, \$5 to \$16; flatbreads, \$9 to \$12; charcuterie, \$5 to \$9; wines by the glass, \$5 to \$31; by the 375-milliliter carafe, \$9 to \$56.

**Info:** (310) 231-0316, [upstairs2.com](http://upstairs2.com)

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