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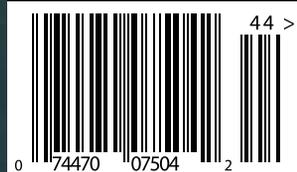
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HITTING THE MARK

from simple dishes to complex cocktails, original art and quirky decor, The Mark in Olympia hits the spot

BY ETHAN CHUNG
PHOTOS BY LISA OWEN

Eartha Kitt's soothing voice flowed from hidden speakers. Soft, leopard print chairs were inviting. As jazz tunes continued to play, it was as if the comfortable, intimate dining room was whispering, "Sit back. Relax. You'll be here awhile."

The Mark in Olympia opened in 2001. It's owned and operated by Lisa Owen, a Berkeley, Calif. – native and graduate of The Evergreen State College, who draws on her international experiences of culinary training from Italy and Spain to create simple, beautiful dishes made with the freshest ingredients.

Creativity is evident in all she does, starting with the cocktail menu. The Forbidden – Danska grapefruit vodka with a splash of grapefruit juice served chilled, and Man Trouble – vanilla Absolut, Godiva chocolate liqueur with a splash >>



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of cream, dusted with chocolate, are both good starters. The Man Trouble cocktail was created a while back when a server at the restaurant had a big thing for the bartender. Needless to say, it didn't end well, and Owen made the drink for the heartbroken waitress. Eventually, Man Trouble made its way to the menu. If you're a Mojito fan, you'll also be pleased. Every ingredient tantalizes the taste buds and it's one of the best around.

FRESH FOOD FOUND

The tapas list is filled with cheeses, olives and other delicious nibbles, including boquerones, large Spanish anchovies delivered fresh from Spain by boat. The Manchego cheese is

addictive and complements the Spanish arbequina olives. If you've never tried Manchego, beware. This rich sheep's milk cheese will find its way onto your shopping list every week.

The mixed baby greens salad with breaded and baked Sonoma goat cheese is excellent. The grittiness of the breading adds a unique texture to the salad, and the flavor of the cheese almost made the light balsamic and extra virgin olive oil drizzle an after thought.

The Mark's entrée menu is less expensive compared to other fine dining restaurants, but don't be fooled – good things come in small packages. Owen's rationale is to make sure her customers aren't overwhelmed by limitless choices.



APPLE WOOD GRILL

EGG-FREE TAGLIATELLE WITH GARLIC AND SAGE



This thinking translates into her cooking. Owen cooks with locally grown, organic products. She keeps it simple. Salt, pepper, olive oil and applewood on the grill are standbys when it comes to bringing out the natural flavor of her dishes. At first mention, this may sound a little peculiar, but don't judge before you taste.

"When I go out to eat at nice restaurants, a lot of times I don't feel good after I'm through eating, so many heavy creams and rich sauces. Sometimes it can just be too much," Owen explained.

A sample of pappardelle pasta, a ribbon of noodles tossed with artichoke, lemon zest and thyme and an egg-

free tagliatelle pasta with whole garlic cloves and fresh sage drove home the point – simple can be great. This philosophy is the basis to dishes where every ingredient is the star. Where nothing is overpowered and all of ingredients dance on your palate in perfect harmony. The free range, hormone-free flat iron steak was no exception. It was juicy, tender and infused with applewood smoked goodness.

Anywhere else, dessert would have been impossible. But because Owen's careful craft allows diners to indulge in the feeling of being satisfied rather than sick-to-your-stomach full, it would be a sin not to sweeten the experience. The flourless chocolate torte and raspberry sorbet, coupled with a >>



THE MARK'S OUTDOOR EATING AREA



THE FORBIDDEN MARTINI

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traditional amaro Italian liqueur with café cortado, a smooth Spanish-style espresso, was the perfect ending.

OUTSTANDING IN OLYMPIA

The Mark was built inside the shell of the old City Tire Service store in downtown Olympia. During the construction and design, Owen used recycled materials whenever possible, ranging from old light fixtures from schools to pieces of the original building, most notably the still-working garage door that opens and lets fresh air in during warmer months. Hanging on the walls in the dining room are pieces of original art by employees and local artists – The Mark donates its space as a non-commissioned art gallery.

Even though Owen herself is busy (her kitchen staff is made up of a single sous chef), she manages to find the time to chat with her guests about their meals. Her personable nature adds to the charm of The Mark and she's dedicated to giving her patrons a quality dining experience they'll want to enjoy over and over again.

Owen strives to make The Mark a more green business each year. "We are working to grow our relationships with smaller local farms and non-profit organizations relating to the arts and youth, as well," she said. She thinks Olympia is the perfect place for a business like The Mark. "I think Olympia is a lovely, quirky, creative little town, and my mother lives here."

Whether it's fabulous food with a dash of decadence and a whole lot of healthy or luscious libations you're after, you're in luck because The Mark has both. So give your stomach a rest from those creamy sauces other restaurants slather on your plate and let your taste buds hit The Mark.

WHEN YOU GO

The Mark is located at 407 SW Columbia St. in Olympia. Reservations are recommended. Open Thursday through Saturday from 5 pm to 2 am. Private parties can also be arranged. Call 360.745.4414 for more information.

HOW MUCH?

Dinner entrees range from \$5.75 to \$36. The attached Red Room Café is open Thursday through Saturday from 10 am to 2 pm and serves espresso and light café fare. The Red Room Café also includes a stage that can be used for special events, performances, or displays and features a state of the art sound system. *ping*



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