

Appetizers



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Hot Italian on a cold, rainy night

I stopped in at Sacramento's newest restaurant, Hot Italian, for a first look Sunday night. It's so new it's open but still not finished.

Though I walked several blocks along Sacramento streets to get there, I could have sworn I was somewhere else entirely when I stepped inside. I'm saying that so often these days that it seems Sacramento must be reinventing itself.

Hot Italian has style. It embraces modern design, with plenty of creative touches, from the stools crafted with bicycle wheel rims at the espresso/gelato bar to the pendant lights made of Illy coffee tins hanging from the ceiling. Even the bicycle racks outside are beautiful, functional, sculptural pieces.

Hot Italian, which is still working to finish the exterior and make a few nips and tucks inside, is Sacramento's first LEED certified restaurant. That's a rating you'll be hearing a lot about in the years to come. It stands for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design and comes from the U.S. Green Building Council.

But what about the food? The menu is limited (by design) at the moment until the grand opening in the weeks to come. I hope to do a full review down the road. But first impressions: very impressed.

This is a place whose reputation will rest on its pizzas. These are New York-style, which happen to be Naples-style -- thin crust baked at high heat for only a couple of minutes. That charring you may spot on portions of the crust is a sign of authenticity. Don't send it back.

Pizza aficionados who travel the globe in search of crust done right will enjoy what's coming out of the wood-fired oven at 16th and Q streets. It's just the right combinations of crisp exterior and chewy on the inside. It's thin and light, with the kind of flavor that takes several days to create (while the raw dough retards in the refrigerator).

What's more, our server could not have been better - experienced, attentive, knowledgeable and, well,

charming.

When I moved here a decade ago, I was told Sacramento was a bad pizza town. Now there's pizza everywhere -- and it's the good stuff. Will Hot Italian lead the way? Will the new-ish Masullo? Chicago Fire and its deep dish? How about the quirky Zeldas? Luigi's? Paesano's? Uncle Vito's? Pieces Pizza by the Slice? Or will a chain like California Pizza Kitchen, opening in the spring in what appears to be a beautiful Zocolo-like renovation-in-the-making at 16th and L just blocks away from Hot Italian, find a downtown foothold with pizza lovers?

And don't forget One Speed, the pizzeria-to-be in East Sacramento. It's the creation of Rick Mahan, the chef at Waterboy, the midtown restaurant that has become the standard bearer in practically every category. Like Hot Italian, it will express it's love for cycling, which is practically a way of life in Italy.

One Speed is expected to open in the months ahead.

By then, Sacramentans, once pizza poor, might be able to brag about living in something of a pizza Mecca.

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