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October 16-22, 2003

**FOOD**

**Angelic Upstart**



**MAGIc EYE FOR DETAIL:** Angelina designers Owen Kamihira and Jun Aizaki's rosy, repetitive patterns stretch dizzyingly from wall to wall. Angelic Upstart

**The new prima donna on the block? That would be Stephen Starr's Angelina.**

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 —A.D. Amorosi

by *Maxine Keyser*

Sing, goddess, of Stephen Starr. Sing of his uncanny ability to put his finger directly on the pulse of our desires. In a city that seems to have more Italian restaurants than downtown Naples, he has convinced us that we need one more -- badly.

So, we have Angelina, which does not offer the haute cuisine of Vetri or the red-sauced *abbondanza* of South Philly, but falls beautifully in between. In the space where The Blue Angel once re-created a French brasserie, now Angelina welcomes you into an intimate lounge area that opens into a stunning restaurant that could be anything but Italian. The bar, back-lit in blood red, features bottles of great Italian wines laid sideways, and an intricate bar that glows as well. The burgundy flocked wallpaper, the sconces and the Mona Lisa gazing inscrutably are sly hints of Italy. And then you look up, and on the floating ceiling is Giorgione's reclining nude, *Sleeping Venus*, in all her splendor. You are already transported, and when you pass the huge computer-enhanced images of 16th-century landscapes, inhabited by corpulent nudes, Pan-like revelers and *putti*, you are hooked. This expanse of burgundy and cream Toile de Jouy that covers all the booths, banquettes, sconces and drum-shaped chandeliers could be from Florence or Lyon, and it signals a significant dining experience ahead. Wisely, Starr and decorators Owen Kamihira and Jun Aizaki have retained the original mosaic-tiled floor and the exquisite glass ceiling that glows as the lights dim. It is a perfect showcase for some true Italian cuisine.

Chef Christopher Painter, freed from Tangerine, has done his homework in Batali-land, and has returned armed with some exciting recipes and techniques. As we sip sparkling Prosecco and a Bellini, we nibble an amuse-bouche of capered tuna on grilled bread. Soon we have turned to a scrumptious four-cheese pizza, made unique by dabs of herbed ricotta and a shattering, cracker-like crust. (You can have this pizza at lunch, and great panini too, especially one of cauliflower and broccoli rabe.) Then there are marinated fresh sardines, meaty and tart, accented by a lemony toss of cucumbers, radishes and croutons. And we have calamari lightly dipped in batter, along with some lemon slices, fried to an airy crunch and floating on a sharp olive and tomato broth. Two breads are offered -- a dense Southern Italian loaf and an airier, Tuscan-style one with a definite crunch -- both from Metropolitan. And look, no puddles of olive oil -- real butter!

I'm not surprised, because one of Starr's strong points is that the staff, in black shirts with Angelina scrolled across the back, is already impeccable. They do not hover, but are constantly at attention and knowledgeably comment on the wine and the food.

One must have a pasta course; such is the natural progression of a luxurious, relaxed Italian meal. We try the pasta du jour -- agnolotti stuffed with pumpkin purée, burnished with brown butter and white raisins. The pasta is firm, the filling tender, but it is a bit

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too sweet for me. The pappardelle with a ragu Bolognese is heavenly -- long tendrils of hand-cut, toothsome pasta bathed in a dense, meaty gravy. Seldom am I faced with so many difficult choices.

There's roasted lamb loin with cannellini beans, pork Milanese, roasted veal with fava beans and whole bronzino. There is rabbit: This most underrated little creature is properly roasted, and fragrant with sage and oregano. The meat is all white and tender, like slightly gamy but good chicken, and the cacciatore sauce is so rich that the chickpeas (a different but typically Italian touch) almost melt in its depths. One companion can never resist scallops, and these are very special. A licorice lick of fennel pollen crusts the sweet meat, and the tartness of a lemony confit of artichokes, cherry tomatoes and shallots is even more evident against the scallops' sweetness. The rib-eye steak grilled on the bone, done in the Florentine style and marinated with sage and rosemary, is as flavorful as only that cut can be, and perfectly rare. The traditional accompaniment of spinach and roasted potatoes is flawless, and it all calls for a bold California Rock Rabbit Syrah, which we drink with pleasure. The wine list is eclectic and fair, and naturally weighted with American and Italian vintages.

How to do dessert? We must, however -- when you linger over a meal as we have over this one, you are actually prepared. No wonder the slow food movement started in Italy. Our waitress tells us that the frozen tiramisu is a specialty, and her favorite is the chocolate and hazelnut flourless cake, but we are in the mood for neither. A big bowl of fresh berries with a very strong lemon curd seems like just what we need, but somehow, I am lured by a crostata (a little enclosed tart) of raspberry and fig. Served warm, with a caramel sauce and ice cream of honeyed mascarpone, it is a triumph of tender pastry and jammy filling. Pastry chef Adriana Pavaglio has outdone herself on this one. The menu offers suggestions for a dessert wine with each dessert, but we have reached our limit.

Chris Painter has shown once more that he deserves all of his "Best New Chef" accolades, but he is new no longer. He is obviously a seasoned and dedicated chef who handles his food with a deft, uncompromising touch. Stephen Starr has -- once again -- given us an exciting and sophisticated venue to showcase this food. The decor is so lusciously over the top that it winks mischievously at all its gaudy competitors. Starr is still the star of the show.

*Angelina*

706 Chestnut St., 215-925-6889

Lunch: Mon.-Fri., 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m.; dinner: Mon.-Thu., 5-11 p.m.; Fri-Sat., 5 p.m.-midnight; Sun., 4-10 p.m.

Appetizers, \$6.50-\$15; entrees, \$17-\$28

Wheelchair accessible. Smoking permitted in the bar area. Reservations suggested. All major credit cards except Discover.

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