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Second helpings

BY GREG COX, Correspondent

When I reviewed Taverna Agora in November 2003, I was taken with the convivial Old World charm of the place. The food had its high points, too. But for every epicurean peak in the menu's landscape of traditional Greek fare (I recall crispy fried smelts, shrimp in a rustic white wine sauce, and a moist, cinnamon-fragrant Greek walnut cake with particular fondness), there was a valley. I awarded Taverna Agora two stars, based on the four-star scale we were working with then. That's not bad for a restaurant that had only been open a couple of months. Even then, however, I knew owner Lou Moshakos as a knowledgeable restaurateur with a perfectionist tendency to tweak a restaurant until he gets it just right. I fully expected the food to be more consistent by the time I returned.

I finally got back to Taverna Agora in December (time flies when you're reviewing restaurants in a fast-growing area), and sure enough, the kitchen's performance has improved markedly. On my most recent visit, the Pikilia Taverna appetizer platter was laden from rim to rim with delicately crisp fried calamari; a Greek salad lavished with kalamata olives and feta; and first-rate renditions of skordalia, taramosalata and tzatziki, with plenty of soft, warm pita wedges for dipping. Macaronada tou psara served up plump, properly cooked shrimp, scallops and mussels over linguine in a light, herb-flecked white wine cream sauce (which needed a bit more salt -- my only culinary quibble among everything I sampled that night). Whole roasted pompano, a fresh fish special, was absolutely flawless. And a hefty square of house-made baklava was a richly satisfying conclusion.

I spoke to Moshakos on the phone after my visit. Turns out he has done more than a little tweaking in my absence. Most significantly, he brought in Vasilios "Bill" Kalyvas, a native of Greece and an experienced chef (formerly chef-partner at Taverna Nikos in Durham), as managing partner. Long story short, Moshakos' tweaking and Kalyvas' cooking add up to a new higher rating of -- let's see, 3 stars multiplied by the speed of light squared, factor in the special parameters, carry the one ... that works out to 3 1/2 stars on the new 5-star rating system.

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