

eat & drink

West Town wager

The Three Aces team grows up with second restaurant Charlatan

By Michael Nagrant
FOR REDEYE

Three Aces in Little Italy is a rare combination. It's a spot where you can play pool, toss back shots and then sop up the regret with fluffy ricotta gnocchi or golden fries drenched in killer bolognese sauce, all while listening to a blazing soundtrack of the Rolling Stones and The Clash. Owners Anthony Potenzo and Lyle Aker and their chef/partner Matt Troost created the place they wanted to drink and eat at, and it's a true punk rock restaurant in an era of punk rock fakers. When the trio launched a second venture, Charlatan, in the old West Town Tavern space, I couldn't wait to get my eat on.

The scene: Whereas Three Aces is a gritty rock 'n' roll bar with great food, Charlatan is a grown-up neighborhood restaurant with a modern hunting lodge look. Instead of Three Aces' darkness, Charlatan has a soft, romantic glow cast from a solar system of globe lights and a backlit half moon-shaped mirror behind the bar. "Charlatan is representative of who we are now. It's a little more grown-up," Aker said. "Three Aces is the place you go on a first date, to drink some beer and shoot some pool. Charlatan is more like for the third or fourth date where you can seal the deal."

Likes: To answer the question, pasta is what's happening. Moist meatballs the size of a tennis ball are swaddled in a nest of al dente spaghetti (angel hair pasta's plumper cousin; \$8 half, \$14 full portion) glazed with a red gravy bursting with fiery chili flakes, basil leaves and creamy bits of ricotta. The rich, comforting red sauce transported me to a nonna dreamland of plastic-covered sofas and frilly lamps. As good as it is, the best spaghetti on the menu is the one tossed with fried pumpkin chips, crumbles of stinky blue cheese and a kale and walnut pesto (\$8 half, \$14 full portion). The pumpkin was meaty and dry like a great jerky. The funky, sharp flavor of the blue cheese harmonized with the sweet and herbaceous notes of kale and walnut pesto that coated the noodles. Should my cardiologist place



me on a vegetarian diet, this is the kind of dish that gives me hope for survival.

Gripes: Some of my other choices didn't fare as well. In a skate wing dish (\$22), two pieces of the fish were bone dry, one was soggy and another was moist and tasty. Pickled grapes and capers added sweet-and-sour tang and water-cress offered a peppery bite, but soggy milk-braised fennel didn't bring anything to the party. Slagel Farms beef carpaccio (\$9) featured the unique condiment of "duck bottarga," a smoked and salt-cured duck egg shaved over the meat, but the other garnishes—a few wisps of parmesan and smattering of fingerling potato chips—didn't deliver nearly enough seasoning for the plate.

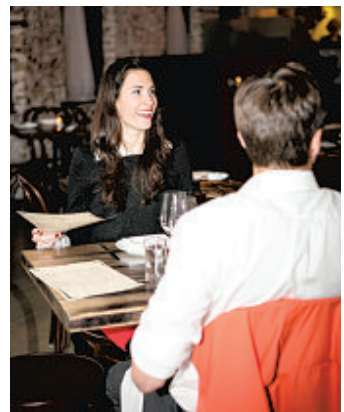


The drinks: One of my favorite beers in the world is Allagash White ale, and so I was looking forward to the Dr. Feelgood cocktail (\$10), a mix of Allagash White, applejack, cardamaro (an herbal Italian digestif) and balsamic vinegar. Unfortunately, the things I love about that beer—the spicy coriander and orange notes—were drowned with bitterness. I just started watching "The Sopranos" (I know) and was thankfully drawn to the much more satisfying Pinky Ring (every good mafia don wears one, \$10), a mix of gin and Escorial (a German herb-infused liqueur) with refreshing lemon and spearmint notes.

The service: My date and I shared a lot of dishes, so it was awesome that food runners diligently took our plates and silverware



Clockwise from left: Spaghetтини, the Dr. Feelgood cocktail, Charlatan's dining room
HILARY HIGGINS PHOTOS FOR REDEYE



with each course. But they didn't always replace them, and staring at your just-delivered food without anything to eat it with is pure torture. My server also spent a lot of time hanging with the bartender and other servers near the corner of the front bar, leaving us with empty glasses. I was dying for a glass of sangiovese as I ate the meatballs and red sauce, but couldn't manage to track down my guy.

Bottom line: There's no question that Charlatan is a neighborhood gem serving incredible pastas, but the service (and a few other dishes) need a little more tweaking if it is to become a destination like sibling spot Three Aces.

REPORTERS VISIT RESTAURANTS UNANNOUNCED AND MEALS ARE PAID FOR BY REDEYE.
REDEYE@TRIBUNE.COM | @REDEYEATDRINK