



There's no better start, or finish, yo

Dining

Dining

Coral Tree Cafe

On August 22, 2008

Casual Encino eatery hits a high note with new wine bar



Address: 17499 Ventura Blvd., Encino [map]
Phone: (818) 789-8733
Hours: Open daily from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m.

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BY ERIC NOLAND > RESTAURANT CRITIC

The wine bottle was delivered to the table with a price tag on it — \$18.95 — as if freshly plucked from the shelf of a shop.

A silly gimmick, but it certainly drives home the point: The Coral Tree Cafe in Encino, having just installed a wine bar, is disdaining the traditional restaurant mark-ups and dispensing wine at retail prices. (Of course, any business can buy a price tag-printing machine, but this 2004 Artesa Merlot from Napa was actually a dollar cheaper than the winery lists on its Web site.)

It's just another example of how the casual Coral Tree is offering value in tough economic times. (It's a spinoff of the original cafe in Brentwood, where the namesake coral trees line up on San Vicente Boulevard.) The fare is simple — pastas, paninis, sandwiches, salads, soups. Also, you order at a counter, then wait at a table for your food to be delivered. But that's how this place is able to keep its offerings in the \$10-\$15 range.

The best dish we encountered was an **ahi tuna Nicoise salad** (\$14.50). The deep-red ahi slices were perfectly seared and provided a warm contrast to the other cool ingredients of the salad: organic field greens, crunchy-fresh green beans, chunks of red potato, slices of hard-cooked egg and Roma tomatoes. The hints of ginger, garlic and vinaigrette complemented the array nicely, too. The soup of the day, **French onion** (\$5.50), was well-executed, a savory concoction with cheese melted over a couple of crusts of baguette that floated on the surface.



A major disappointment among the starters was the **chopped salad** (\$11.25), a colorless pile of iceberg lettuce that hadn't been dried sufficiently after rinsing. There was some shredded turkey breast in there, along with garbanzo beans, chunks of cucumber and tomato, but they couldn't save the dish. When we first ordered at the counter, we asked if we could keep a running tab and dine in stages, coming back at some point to order the main courses. What a nice surprise it was, then, when the hostess stopped by the table later to take the entree orders.

Similarly, the fellow manning the wine bar opened the bottle at the table and later swung by to refill glasses. Thus, the Coral Tree may officially be a counter operation, but the staff goes the extra step to be accommodating. **Penne al forno** (\$12.50) featured a tasty assemblage of spinach, tomatoes, peppers, mushrooms and fresh basil, with chunks of chicken that had been cooked too much and some pancetta pieces that provided a salty accent to the course. The meat was plenty tender in a **hanger steak panini** (\$11.95), the ingredients held together by melted provolone cheese.

The dessert selection was extensive — the cafe is a popular hangout for young people, who fuel up on coffee and sugar and peck at laptops — so we asked the hostess for help. She raved about the **coconut cream pie** (\$4.95), but we were unimpressed, finding the filling gooey and the crust cookie-like and uninspired.

At its best: No one is doing anything daring in the kitchen, but the ingredients are of good quality, the preparations are well-balanced and the prices are right.

Could be better: The menu is printed in tiny brown type on brown paper, and is almost unreadable in the restaurant light.

CORAL TREE CAFE ★★★

Details: 17499 Ventura Blvd., Encino. Open daily from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. (818) 789-8733, www.coraltreecafe.com.

Cost: Soups \$5.25 and \$5.50, salads \$9.25 to \$14.50, sandwiches and paninis \$9.95 to \$11.95, pastas \$10.50 to \$12.50, desserts \$1.95 to \$4.95.

Noteworthy: Extensive selection of coffee drinks, and the beans are said to be certified organic and shade-grown. The cafe also bakes all of its own breads. The decor is farmhouse rustic, with an inviting patio out front. Happy hour wine prices are tough to beat — \$5 per glass from 4 to 7 p.m. There is a Coral Tree Express in the Westfield Topanga mall.

Recommended items: French onion soup (special), ahi tuna Nicoise salad, steak panini, penne al forno. (17499 Ventura Blvd., Encino, 818-789-8733, www.coraltreecafe.com)

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