

## Review: Cetrella in Los Altos

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Executive chef Mike Ellis, left, is photographed with owner M'hamed Bahet at the Cetrella restaurant in Los Altos, Calif., on Thursday, Nov. 12, 2015. (Josie Lepe/ Bay Area News Group)

### Cetrella an exciting newcomer to Los Altos dining scene

Compared to neighboring Palo Alto and Mountain View, Los Altos' restaurant scene hasn't been as dynamic over the past few years, but that's starting to change as new restaurants have opened in its comparatively quaint downtown. One of the most exciting newcomers is Cetrella.

After 14 years in Half Moon Bay and a fair amount of critical acclaim, owner M'hamed Bahet decided to open a branch in a new retail and office space on Main Street in Los Altos, next to Foothill Expressway.



Executive chef Mike Ellis is photographed holding an entree, roasted Pitman Farms duck breast, at the Cetrella restaurant in Los Altos, Calif., on Thursday, Nov. 12, 2015. (Josie Lepe/ Bay Area News Group) (Josie Lepe)

The main dining room is bright and airy, with floor-to-ceiling windows opposite an open kitchen, and a wall mural by a local artist, but the sound there can really ricochet. Seating is at tables for two or four, and at long banquettes for parties of six to eight. Although appealing to the eye, the stadium-style arrangement of banquettes makes conversation almost impossible between people seated at opposite ends of those larger tables. They'd work brilliantly if, say, a couple were taking along both sets of parents who didn't really get along together. Cetrella also offers a good-sized bar area and two private dining rooms.

The résumé of executive chef Michael Ellis includes Dry Creek Kitchen in Healdsburg (during its Michelin-star era), establishments in San Francisco and service as the first chef at Hult's in Los Gatos.

It appears Ellis has found the perfect home at Cetrella, since nearly everything we tried was excellent. The menu will interest sophisticated diners, as well as the less adventurous. It also features a good number of vegetarian dishes that are easily adaptable for vegans.

In typical Italian fashion, it is arranged according to appetizer, pasta and main course groupings. It would be a mistake to skip over the pasta course. Except for the gluten-free versions, all are made in house. Choices vary from pillowy balls of ricotta gnudi to ravioli made with squid ink. Each dish is wholly distinct from the others. If both a pasta and main are too much, Cetrella makes sharing easy.



Roasted Pitman Farms duck breast with poppy seed spaetzle, red cabbage, apple soubise and port is photographed at the Cetrella restaurant in Los Altos, Calif., on Thursday, Nov. 12, 2015. (Josie Lepe/ Bay Area News Group) ( Josie Lepe )

Bahet has put together a sizable wine list with selections from France and Italy, as well as their New World counterparts. The list includes a good selection of wines by the glass, though several bottles on the menu can be ordered without exceeding the price of just two glasses.

We started a meal with a fritto misto (\$14) that was uncommonly good. The succulent panko-breaded rock shrimp were served with a creamy dill-caper sauce accompanied by two kinds of peppers, green beans and fried olives. Another starter, the beet salad with persimmons, feta and crunchy walnuts (\$14), was beautifully presented. Its contrasts of sweet and salty and silky and crunchy made clear why this dish has become a classic.

Those were the only appetizers we tried, because the pastas proved to be the real temptations. Ribbons of pappardelle made with stone-ground mustard in the dough were topped with a hearty lamb ragu (\$26). The addition of tangy yogurt, mint, sweet carrots and turnips helped dial back the richness of the lamb.

Cappelletti (similar to tortellini) were filled with a creamy, truffled polenta (\$24). Though a somewhat unusual combination, it was the highlight of both meals. This pasta was served in a spicy tomato sauce that, surprisingly, didn't overpower the delicate truffle flavor of the filling. Two perfect meatballs, only slightly smaller than tennis balls and packed with flavor, completed the dish.

Only the carbonara with pancetta (\$24) missed the mark. Black pepper, an integral part of the classic version, was included here in the pasta dough itself. The dish was served with the yolk of a raw duck egg for diners to stir in themselves. However, the pasta was underdone, and the yolk didn't blend well into the dish, as it likely would have done had the pasta been less al dente.

The roasted duck breast (\$29), which we shared, came plated separately for each of us. Duck breast is notoriously hard to get right, but this was pleasantly pink in the middle and tender from end to end. It was served with red cabbage and poppy seed spaetzle. We wished the serving had more of the tiny free-form noodles.



A dish from the pasta and risotto menu, Cappelletti filled with truffle polenta organic pork and beef meatballs, is photographed at the Cetrella restaurant in Los Altos, Calif., on Thursday, Nov. 12, 2015. (Josie Lepe/ Bay Area News Group) ( Josie Lepe )

The medium-rare filet mignon (\$32) was superb. A couple of times, I inadvertently used a butter knife, rather than my steak knife, to cut it and hardly noticed a difference. We paired this dish with a side of Brussels sprouts (\$8) that were

light, crisp and lemony -- a pleasant change from versions seasoned with bacon fat found so often on menus this time of year.

If you save room for dessert, try the Italian doughnut holes called bomboloni (\$8). Though I've been served flavorless versions, these were good -- possibly thanks to the use of ricotta, a pinch of salt in the batter or both. With orange curd (which could have been more orangey) and mixed-berry jam for dipping, they make for a light ending. The chocolate trio (\$10) -- layers of chocolate cake, cream and mousse -- is a more decadent choice that still isn't overly heavy.

Service at both a late lunch and a busy dinner hour was attentive. Our water glasses were kept full, and there were no long waits between courses. Bahet himself seemed to be constantly in the dining room to make sure everyone was happy.

To judge by the Friday dinner crowd, Cetrella is what diners have been waiting for in Los Altos' restaurant renaissance.

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## Cetrella

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400 Main St., Los Altos; 650-948-0400, [www.cetrella.com/cetrella-los-altos](http://www.cetrella.com/cetrella-los-altos) The dish: A popular dining destination in Half Moon Bay for more than a decade, Mediterranean-influenced Cetrella now has a new executive chef and a Silicon Valley location. Executive chef Michael Ellis uses produce and items from Bay Area farms and artisans to create a menu with both sophisticated and approachable choices.

Pluses: Attentive service, top-notch pasta and an accessible location off Foothill Expressway.

Minuses: At busy times, the dining room can get loud. Tables for six or eight diners aren't conducive to full-table conversation.

Hours: Lunch Monday-Friday 11 a.m.-2 p.m.; dinner Sunday-Thursday 5-9:30 p.m., Friday-Saturday 5-10 p.m.; brunch Saturday-Sunday 10:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m.

Policy: Restaurant reviews are conducted anonymously, and the Mercury News pays for all meals.