

Modena a model for quality cuisine

BY CLAY FONG
FOR A&E SPOTLIGHT

Among other claims to fame, Modena, Italy, is home to legendary automakers Ferrari and Lamborghini. The city also lends its name to Longmont's Modena Wine Cafe, a combination eatery, bar and coffeehouse. It's a thoroughly modern spot whose vibrant colors and sleek stainless and glass wine-dispensing apparatus are reminiscent of cutting-edge Italian industrial design.

Despite its name, Modena offers much more than Italian fare. More than a dozen tapas plates make for an eclectic menu encompassing antipasto, chorizo street tacos and Korean barbecued wings, with gluten-free crackers available as an accompaniment for \$2. Entree choices are more limited, with an emphasis on seafood such as scallops and halibut. On the lighter side, there are soups, salads and grilled sandwiches, including a vegetarian number freighted with artichoke hearts, sun-dried tomato, red pepper and spinach.

About 150 wines are available via Modena's high-tech wine system. But like a Formula One race car, this technology is only as good as its driver, and our welcoming and unpretentious server was highly adept in making wine recommendations. After my dining companion shared her wine preferences, the staffer suggested a top-notch flight, highlighted by a \$5 taster of Italian 2012 Betulle Sauvignon Blanc.

Fresh is the best way to describe the compelling flavors of a \$10 salad of pistachio-crusted goat cheese and balsamic-glazed strawberries over spinach. Balsamic vinegar, Modena's other famed export, is a chef's secret weapon for improving strawberries, and this ingredient's acid enhanced the fruit's sweetness. This salad also made for a decent-sized portion when shared by two diners.

A homespun tapas, \$7 deviled eggs, received a successful update courtesy of red Hawaiian sea salt and Fresno chile aioli. Sided with salad greens, these eggs distin-



Photos by Matthew Jonas / A&E Spotlight

The key to this salad at Modena Wine Cafe are the balsamic-glazed strawberries, which join pistachio-crusted goat cheese atop spinach.

Modena Wine Cafe

Food: ★★★
Service: ★★★
Ambience: ★★★
Price: \$\$-\$\$\$
Address: 600 Longs Peak Ave., Longmont
Contact: 720-438-7410 or modenawinecafe.com
Hours: 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Wednesdays-Saturdays and 10 a.m.-10 p.m. Sundays
Credit cards: Yes
Noise level: Moderate, making it easy for conversation and appreciating the unobtrusive Latin music in the background. And it certainly beats the throaty roar of a Ferrari's V12 engine.

gished themselves through a yolk shot through with the mellow heat and fruity floral qualities of the chile. Texturally, this selection was also a winner, due to perfect timing that gave the white ideal give without a hint of rubberiness.

Equally appealing was the \$10 wild forest mushrooms tapas. Gar-



The grits in Modena's butter-poached shrimp are an organic antebellum product from South Carolina's Anson Mills.

lic, Maytag blue cheese and truffle oil, which easily could have been overwhelming, instead contributed low-key bite and tang that highlighted the mushroom's earthy richness. Accompanying crostini was also noteworthy, thanks to a crisp thinness that made for addictive crunch.

My friend's main course was the

\$16 chicken breast. Moist and tender poultry, shrouded in flaky puff pastry, came stuffed with a Mediterranean mix of chorizo and feta. More flavorful and substantial than most chicken preparations, this bird was complemented by an exquisite winter squash risotto. This properly

Please see DINING, 13

DINING *from Page 12*

al dente addition evoked a cozy Thanksgiving side dish with a dash of sweetness and warming spices.

My initial impression of the \$17 butter-poached shrimp over grits was that the starch was under-seasoned. These grits were the organic antebellum product from South Carolina's Anson Mills. These were not the insipid diner grits that seem as if they came out of a jar with a picture of a cherubic baby on the label. Instead, these possessed a coarser, rougher hewn consistency that my dining companion favorably compared to steel-cut oats. The hearty mouthfeel was welcome and stood in compelling contrast to the delicate briny vanilla notes of the seafood. In time, the grits' flavor grew on me, thanks in no small part to the bits of Tasso ham layered on a smoky bacon-like savor.

Dessert ended the meal on a high note, and both of our finishing sweets were, in a manner of speaking, quite spirited. A \$7 serving of fresh strawberries and

blue berries arrived swimming in an assertive Grand Marnier creme Anglaise. The taste of cognac and orange was pronounced, but not to the point of detracting from the berries' freshness and taste.

More potent was a serving of \$6 Twisted Cream ice cream infused with a potent dose of Left Hand Nitro Milk Stout. Beer lovers will especially appreciate this dessert, which can be served only to those of legal drinking age. If Doc from John Steinbeck's Cannery Row was around, he'd view this as the ideal foundation for his notorious beer milkshake.

Modena is a welcome addition to Longmont's culinary landscape, dishing out something for just about every appetite. Those desiring full dinner can make themselves at home at a table, while those wanting a lighter bite and wine can get comfortable in the living room-like lounge area. But no matter what one's pleasure is, they'll find a quality of food and service at a surprisingly good price.