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Trust your chef

By [Kate Washington](#)

L Wine Lounge and Urban Kitchen ★★★½

Dinner for One: \$20 - \$40

The menu at the new L Wine Lounge and Urban Kitchen—one of a crop of wine bars in Midtown—is as spare as the restaurant’s stark-chic décor and one-letter name. In contrast to the menu trend of telling you where every leaf of chard or shred of cheese on your plate came from, L lists its dishes by the simplest possible descriptors: fresh fish, flat-iron steak, Croque Madame, Amelia’s salad, cured meats. At the bottom, in italics, you’re implored to “trust your chef.” The good news is that you mostly can—and, happily, there’s not that much bad news, though some dishes seem a little peculiar, about which more later.

That chef is Ame Harrington, lately the chef at the Sacramento Natural Foods Co-op’s doomed Elk Grove outpost. In keeping with that experience, the menu further notes that they serve “local products from farms, ranches, and fisheries guided by principles of sustainability.” Sustainability is a notably slippery term, but it’s all about trust.

I think anyone could trust L’s designers. The space is mod and angular, with little touches like a chandelier in a corner to keep it human, and a nice dark-wood color scheme with pea-green accents. We sat upstairs in the “Champagne room,” a semiprivate lounge with bubble shapes in wood trim on the walls. It overlooks a pleasant patio with a rather odd but entrancing fountain.

The wine program matches the space in hipness. There’s a nightly flight—on the night we were there, Rhône varietals were featured, with three Roussannes and three Grenaches, both flights thoroughly and evocatively described. I enjoyed the Grenache flight, with an Australian, French and Californian choice, varying from fruity to spicy. (Oddly, however, the suggested dishes to pair with each of the wines were nowhere to be found on the short menu. But the bottles are available for sale, so perhaps the idea is for you to go home and implement the pairings on your own.) You’ll also find plenty of wines by the glass, of course, and the bottle, with the list veering temptingly toward intriguing varietals.

All the food comes as smaller plates, meant—as the menu says—to be “mixed, matched & shared.”

We found the service to be a bit slow getting off the ground—it took a while to get our food ordered and to get a few of our questions about the menu answered—but always very affable, and once the food started coming all was well. We did have bread to nibble on, of course, and L has followed the current trend of presenting bread more or less as a starter: here, thin slices of baguette came with the tasty, unusual combination of ground toasted hazelnuts, oil and salt. We started with an herb and endive salad, which also had slices of crisp pear, a barely there dressing, bacon and almonds. It was a lovely, fresh plate.

Also enjoyable was the chicken-liver pâté. My husband was skeptical about that one, so I had it all to myself, though it was too rich for me to finish. The word “pâté” doesn’t really convey its velvety yet light richness; it had almost a mousse-like, lightly gamy quality, and it spread like silk. Leaves of crisp-fried, translucent tarragon and some caramelized onions added different textures and flavors to a nice dish—albeit one that should be ordered by a group.

I was less thrilled with the odd seasonal tartine, which the menu advertised as featuring radicchio and burrata cheese. Burrata is a luxe cheese related to mozzarella, in which the fresh curd is stretched around a filling of bits of mozzarella mixed with cream. The tartine was a sandwich with thick, unwieldy slices of beet, as well as the radicchio, which got a bit lost, and a tiny bit of the burrata melted on top, plus a lot of olives dominating the flavors and a little pile of what seemed to be sautéed mild green peppers alongside. Frankly, I found the combination baffling. Why melt the burrata, which shows to its best advantage when fresh? Why include the beets, which made the whole thing hard to eat? The dish just never cohered.

Trust, however, was restored with the simple side of spiced pommes frites, sprinkled with more of those translucent fried herbs and a salty, addictive but low-key spice mixture. The fries themselves were light and golden and crisp, and they tasted like they had been fried in some kind of fat you wouldn’t tell your doctor about. Yum. Similarly rewarding was the little flat-iron steak, topped with tiny slices of crisp, dry fried onions (like Funyuns in heaven) and a rich, dusky-flavored mushroom sauce around it. It was cooked just a bit past the requested medium-rare, but it was still juicy and delicious.

Desserts were simple but good: I had berries topped with a cold, creamy splodge of mascarpone and accompanied with a crumbly lavender shortbread cookie, and my husband had chocolate mousse, which was predictably yummy. There are also some nice dessert wines, and our server steered my husband to the complex, caramelly Fladgate tawny port—a sweet ending to a meal that, overall, justified a certain level of trust.