

Charming new eatery has a fun, young feel

Side Dish

By John Vollertsen | For The New Mexican

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You gotta love the spirit of a restaurant that has a pickle on the men's room door and a cabbage on the ladies' room door! A pre-opening promotional dinner at the just-opened **Vinaigrette** (Don Cubero Alley and Cerrillos Road, behind La Unica dry cleaners) proved to be a delicious sneak preview of great things to come.

The overall atmosphere is cheery and casual, with modern red metal café chairs and smooth wooden tables and benches giving the décor a fun and young feel.

Charming owner **Erin Wade** had some directional help from chef **Eric Laslow**, recently of **Sunrise Springs**, who consulted with Wade on getting the bright café set up. The Harvard-grad proprietress has designed a creative menu and seems to already be enjoying herself; her big, generous smile on that pre-opening night certainly made it apparent she possesses the personality to be the "hostess with the mostest."

The challenge will be to launch a restaurant featuring a primarily salad-based menu during the coldest months of the year. By adding a soup (\$4 per cup, \$6 for a bowl) to your meal — like one of the delicious versions we sampled, a wild mushroom stew with fried olive bread and a hearty roasted squash with crunchy pumpkin seeds and a drizzle of truffle oil — you'll be able to warm up on a chilly day.

The clever salads also come with the option of adding grilled and braised meats and seafood. We loved the French frisée topped with a soft poached egg, plump lardons (bacon) and a warm shallot vinaigrette (\$7.95). A moist and tender duck leg confit upped the price to \$15.95, but made it a heartier main course. Similarly, the addition of perfectly grilled and sliced pork tenderloin (\$5.50) to a salad of grilled Bosc pears, toasted pecans, bacon and gorgonzola (\$10.95) also did the trick — we were well supped.

My guests reminded me that not everyone dines on foie gras and filet mignon as much as I do, and they loved feeling as though they had enjoyed a healthy dinner — despite the fact they knocked off two baskets of the delicious bread during the meal.

Vinaigrette is open 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday through Saturday, closed Sundays. Healthy and fresh food is always in season, and I have no doubt the café will draw a crowd year-round. (For reservations or help finding the café, call 820-9205.)