

# GOURMET TAPAS

Picco brings small plates to Larkspur

BY ERIKA LENKERT



**A**S A FOODIE WHO recently moved to Marin from San Francisco (by way of Napa), I made it my first order of business to find my ideal dining destination: a casual neighborhood restaurant with a vibe that inspires me to dress up my jeans, and food quality that makes driving to the city superfluous. I quickly discovered that no restaurant north of the Golden Gate fits the bill better than Picco.

Apparently, I'm not the only one who thinks so. Every Friday at 5:30 p.m., there's a front-door logjam at Larkspur's newest restaurant, which sits in the space formerly occupied by Roxanne's. Diners without reservations flank the entrance on barstools, while those who

possessed more foresight cluster at tables in the rustic-chic, mood-lit room of brick, wood beams, and vibrant local artwork.

The seasonally inspired, ingredient-driven menu consists solely of small plates. This once-novel idea is now de rigueur in many cosmopolitan dining rooms. But Picco chef and owner Bruce Hill believes this dining style may still be hard to swallow for Marinites accustomed to large portions at small-town prices. Appeasement should come, though, when considering the gas, bridge toll, and valet parking money otherwise needed to indulge in exquisite treats like hamachi, pomelo, and avocado skewers, all standing like birthday candles on a thin stainless steel tray. With their delicate burst of acidity and crunch of salt, these edible artworks prove that Marin does have a chef who understands that restraint, balance, and a judicious use of outstanding ingredients equal exceptional dining.

Further evidence arrives in gorgeous discs of ahi tuna tartare—sculpted mounds of diced raw fish, Asian pears, shiso, sesame, and soy on bite-size sticky rice cakes; organic cauliflower and truffle soup that's impossibly light and creamy at the same time; sautéed day boat scallops with white chanterelle mushrooms and a heavenly pillow of celery root flan; and

a trio of mini burgers topped with caramelized onions, crimini mushrooms, and Point Reyes blue cheese. Accompanied by a mini squeeze-bottle of ketchup, the burgers are as cute as they are tasty—as was every gorgeous dish I sampled, with the exception of a few oversalted ones.

Showcasing only a few ingredients is just what Hill intends when crafting the menu. The chef, who gained prominence in San Francisco institutions such as Bix, the Waterfront Restaurant, Fog City Diner, Aqua, and Oritalia, opened Picco to highlight local farms' best seasonal vegetables. Hill succeeds by building dishes from the bottom up, starting with some great cauliflower, for example, then adding truffle or fish as the finish. Like a totem pole, where the most important figure is found at the base, holding all others up, Hill's food starts with a great foundation and is topped with just enough enhancement to reach the "peak"—the translation of the Italian word *picco*.

With small plates that are big on taste, competent service, a nice wine list, a cheese selection, and a fabulous finale of mini chocolate shakes with molten chocolate madeleines, Picco already ranks high among Marin's top dining summits.

*Picco, 320 Magnolia Ave., Larkspur, 415.924.0300, restaurantpicco.com*