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Danyelle Freeman RESTAURANT GIRL

New York gets a half-baked replica of the original Ago ★★☆☆☆☆

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Sunshine for News

Ago's sprawling setting fails to achieve the warmth or authenticity of an Italian trattoria.

The New York debut of Ago restaurant in the newly opened Greenwich Hotel had the makings of a summer blockbuster. The famous West Hollywood flagship has long been a powerful magnet for celebrities and movie moguls, including film giants Robert De Niro and the Weinstein brothers, who are partners in the Ago empire. This Tribeca outpost is the fourth offshoot of chef-partner Agostino Sciandri's Italian eatery, following expansions in Las Vegas and Miami.

The recruitment of Grayling Design - responsible for such iconic venues as Balthazar and Patis - set high expectations for an impressive, Old World interior. Though the space is detailed with antique mirrors, vintage farmhouse chairs and terra cotta tiles imported from Tuscany, the sprawling setting fails to achieve the warmth or authenticity of an Italian trattoria. If you're seated in the rear dining room - worlds away from the buzz of the bar - you'll feel as though you've been exiled to Siberia.

My qualms about the vast surroundings temporarily faded when a rich burrata arrived at our table. It was a creamy mound of mozzarella that melted blissfully on the tongue. Many Italian classics - eggplant parmigiana, veal Milanese and fritto misto - make an admirable showing, and there's a fine assortment of wood-fired pizzas that taste as good as they look. The best variation is the "Capricciosa," topped with fresh artichokes, black olives and wafer-thin ribbons of ham.

The small dishes in this oversize eatery prove to be the most reliable. An appetizer of moist baby cuttlefish skewers, ringed in a savory squid ink sauce, and juniper-smoked swordfish carpaccio both stand out. There is also a distinguished salad of baby artichokes over a tangle of frisee, enlivened by a lemon dressing.

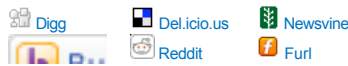
But the pasta dishes - a bellwether of any worthwhile Italian restaurant - charted a much bumpier course. The veal-stuffed spinach cappelletti arrived in a greasy puddle of butter-sage sauce; the gnocchi tossed in a lamb ragu tasted like Play-Doh pelted with gravel; a bowl of spaghetti with clams and broccoli rabe was horribly oversalted.

A thick and finely charred rib-eye suffered the same salty fate. This kind of sloppy execution continued with a disconcertingly gamey squab served over polenta. Then came an overcooked fillet of salmon with oily escarole, which my dining companion likened to inedible banquet food served at a wedding.

The desserts were a collective washout. There was a sorry excuse for a tiramisu, runny and bombed with cinnamon, as well as a chalky chocolate tortine glued to the plate by a mucky passionfruit sauce. A listless apple tart capped off with burnt slivers of almonds was equally unimpressive.

Didn't Ago get the memo about New York's newfound predilection for modest restaurants with modest prices? This is a big-city restaurant with prices to match, but there aren't enough reliable pleasures or sparks of invention on this tired Italian menu.

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Stars may be attached to Ago New York, but in the end it summons memories of a film franchise in decline: the Part IV you wish you hadn't paid to see on the big screen.

Diners would be better off pursuing De Niro's earlier work - perhaps Nobu, which is conveniently located right down the street.

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