

BY MICHAEL BAUER

# Fashion Forward

## Inconsistency rules at the uber-trendy Americano

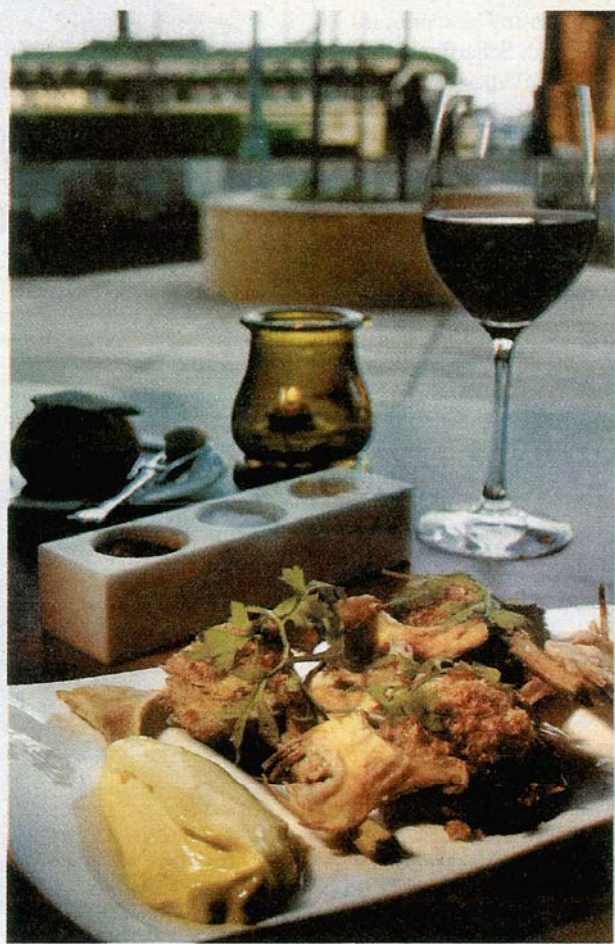
I felt as if I were stepping into a Banana Republic photo shoot as I entered Americano restaurant through the serene lobby of the Hotel Vitale, the new San Francisco hotel across from the Ferry Building.

Fashionably attired patrons sprawled on cushy couches in the circular lounge, sipping frosty martinis. Others congregated at the bar and around narrow bar tables, downing gin on the rocks, signature Americanos made of Campari and sweet vermouth (\$9) and bottles of Moretti beer.

As we angled through the maze of bodies to take our seats in the stylish 50-seat dining room sequestered in back, I wondered how all these people heard about this place. It was like a restaurant version of "Field of Dreams" — "If you build it, they will come."

Only about a month old at the time, Americano had already been discovered by those in the after-work crowd, who drink until they're hungry and then go back into the restaurant to eat. The dining room looks like something you'd find in a W Hotel, luxurious and tailored, but with a few lovable quirks that stimulate conversation.

There's a trend in restaurants these days to lighten the mood, whether it's with fun titles on the menu or subtle touches in the interior. At Americano, the sense of humor is everywhere. The top of the canopy above the open kitchen is filled with an arrangement of various sizes and shapes of lamp shades, lit from underneath. At the back of the room, a ginger-



The artichoke hearts appetizer at Americano.

jar shaped lamp is suspended by nearly invisible wires and looks as if it's levitating when viewed through the gauzy scrim separating the dining areas.

Floor lamps with oval, slanted-edged shades on two angled poles punctuate the space next to the gauzily draped windows that overlook the Embarcadero. But, what really rallies conversation are the four framed portraits bolted to the ceiling. They are friends of hotel owner Chip Conley, immigrants who came here to pursue their dreams. They all made good — including the restaurant's designer, Colum McCartan — reinforcing the name, Americano. It's also no coincidence that they are young and posed as if they could be part of a new high-end fashion campaign.

The place oozes trendiness. The impressive bar fronted with smooth river rocks, the upholstered armchairs the color of Irish moss and the rich chocolate brown walls and ceiling all give the place a contemporary look that contrasts with the rustic nature of the California/Italian menu.

The food has a first-rate pedigree. It's crafted by chef Paul Arenstam, who wowed diners at his short-lived Belon, which fell victim to its impossible location, and then as the chef at Grand Cafe.

His gutsy style shines on dishes such as artichokes fried with a salt cod stuffing and served with a generous mound of preserved Meyer lemon aioli (\$9); and green garlic soup

## A Drinker's List — Sophisticated, Yet Approachable

Sophisticated and approachable are the first descriptors that come to mind when looking over the beverage list at Americano. Every taste seems to have been considered, yet the offerings are focused, well thought out and reasonably priced.

The wine list is organized by areas and then broken down into styles, with excellent choices in each category. The 100 selections include lots of top-rated familiar brands for those who want to

stay in their comfort zone, and more specialized offerings for those who gravitate to the obscure — for example, the 2003 Aura Rueda/Verdejo from Spain (\$36), 2004 Eroica Riesling produced by Chateau Ste. Michelle and Dr. Loosen (\$44), 2003 Movia Ribolla Gialla from Slovenia (\$49), 2001 Showket Sangiovese (\$50) and 2001 Ne Cede Malis Rhone Blend from Stags' Leap (\$69). Nearly two dozen wines are offered by the glass.

Since the bar and lounge take up a lot of the space at Americano, it makes sense that there's a whole page of after-dinner beverages, including interesting dessert wines, grappa, port, Madera, Banyuls, Armagnac, cognac, whiskeys and bourbon. Also you'll find intriguing beers, coffees, teas, cocktails and nonalcoholic beverages. As with the wine list, there's a little something for every taste.

If you bring your own wine, corkage is \$15. —M.B.