

The Living Arts

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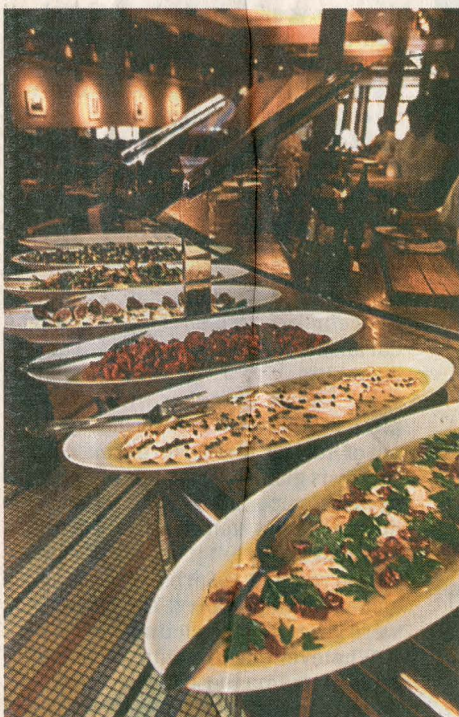
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The New York Times

A TASTE OF SAN FRANCISCO

Ruth Reichl

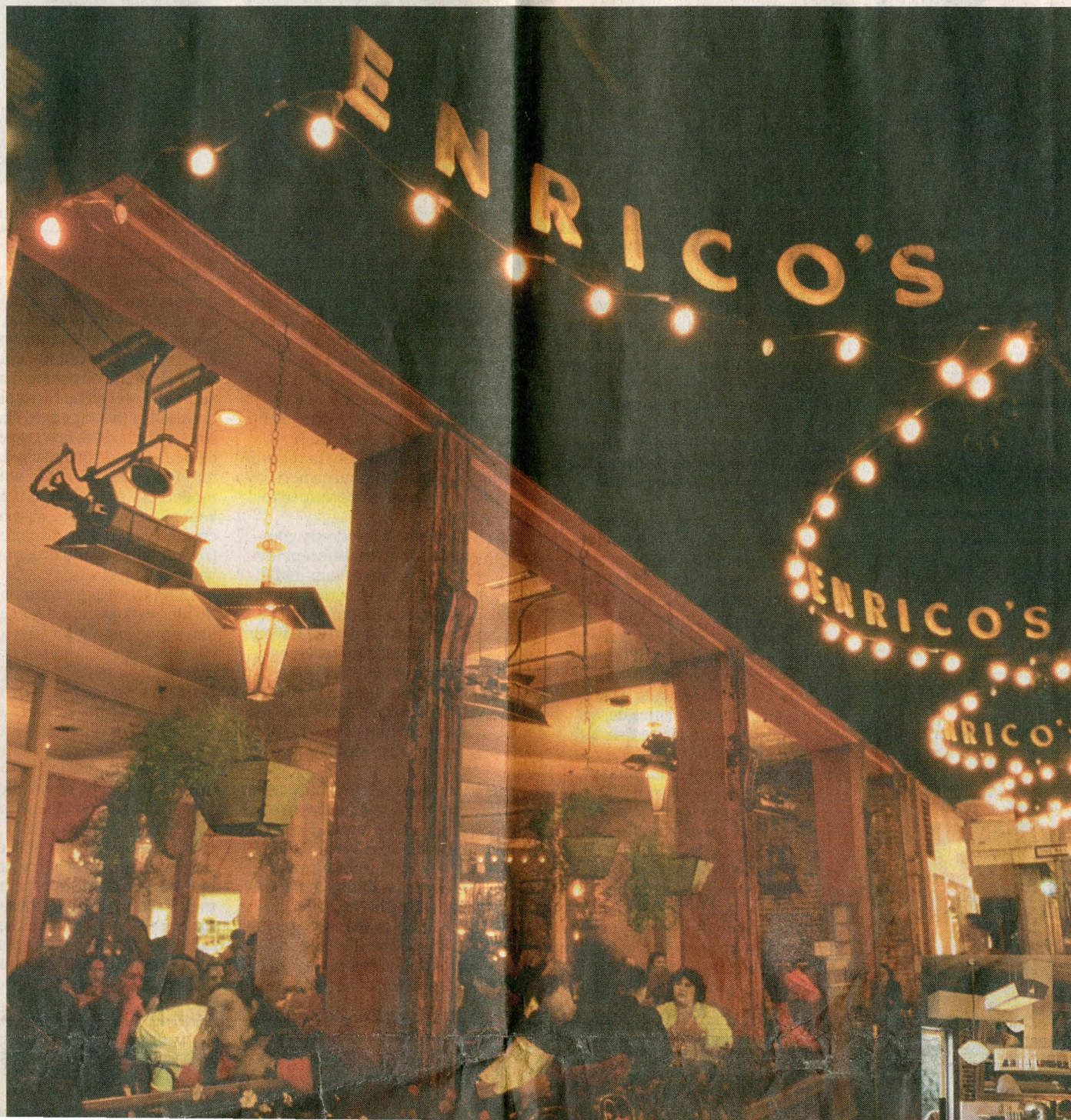
Culinary Lights: North Beach Shines Again



SAN FRANCISCO — North Beach is a gentle old Italian neighborhood that ambles up the hill from San Francisco Bay, in the shade of Telegraph Hill. Only 30 years ago, the small streets were lined with butchers who made their own sausages, and with bakeries that supplied every Italian restaurant in town. Old men played bocce in the park in front of the Church of Saints Peter and Paul, and argued over espresso in the sidewalk cafes along Columbus Avenue. The neighborhood was sprinkled with modest restaurants — Columbus, U.S., Little Joe's — where bachelors gathered nightly to talk politics and eat good, solid meals at low prices.

When the Beats arrived in the 1950's, they coexisted peacefully with the population, and even the sex shops crawling along Broadway gave the place personality. There was a fine balance until Chinatown began to encroach from the western end and the Italians began moving out; suddenly, it seemed, the strip joints were dominant.

By the early 80's, it was impossible to go into any of the neighborhood places without



and a cafe there. But in the last year the North Beach movement has picked up steam. Restaurants are opening at a stunning rate, and once moribund shops and bakeries are packed. And why not? The neighborhood has charm. It has history. It is one of San Francisco's sunniest areas and it is just a short walk from the financial district or Fisherman's Wharf. More important, North Beach has character.

San Francisco has always loved food, and today it is filled with important new restaurants. I tried them all. I was impressed with Jardinière, bowled over by the transformation of the old Trader Vic's into the new Colonial, stunned by the décor at Loongbar. But you could pick those restaurants up, plunk them down in any city in America and they would be fine. The best restaurants of North Beach, on the other hand, need the neighborhood. They belong to San Francisco. And I found myself irresistibly drawn back.

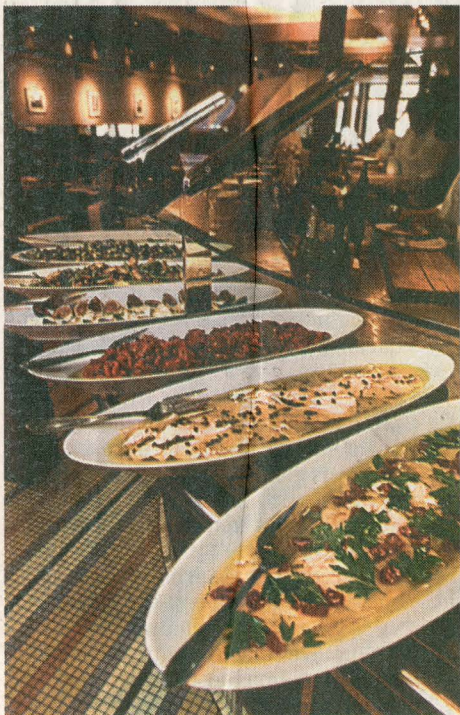
I spent days wandering the streets of North Beach, stopping by its hardware stores, bakeries, coffee roasters and pottery shops. I ate in restaurants old and new. And although I had many wonderful meals, in the end I found myself returning to the ones with the strongest sense of place.

Because the remarkable thing about North Beach is that, unlike Times Square in New York, which is being sanitized into an urban entertainment mall, its renaissance has been organic, gradual and utterly inclusive.

The neighborhood thrums with activity, and every shop is occupied.

Diners leaving San Francisco's hottest new restaurants still find themselves accosted by barkers urging them to come in and watch women take off their clothes. Meanwhile, City Lights Bookstore, as scruffy as ever, is a constant reminder of

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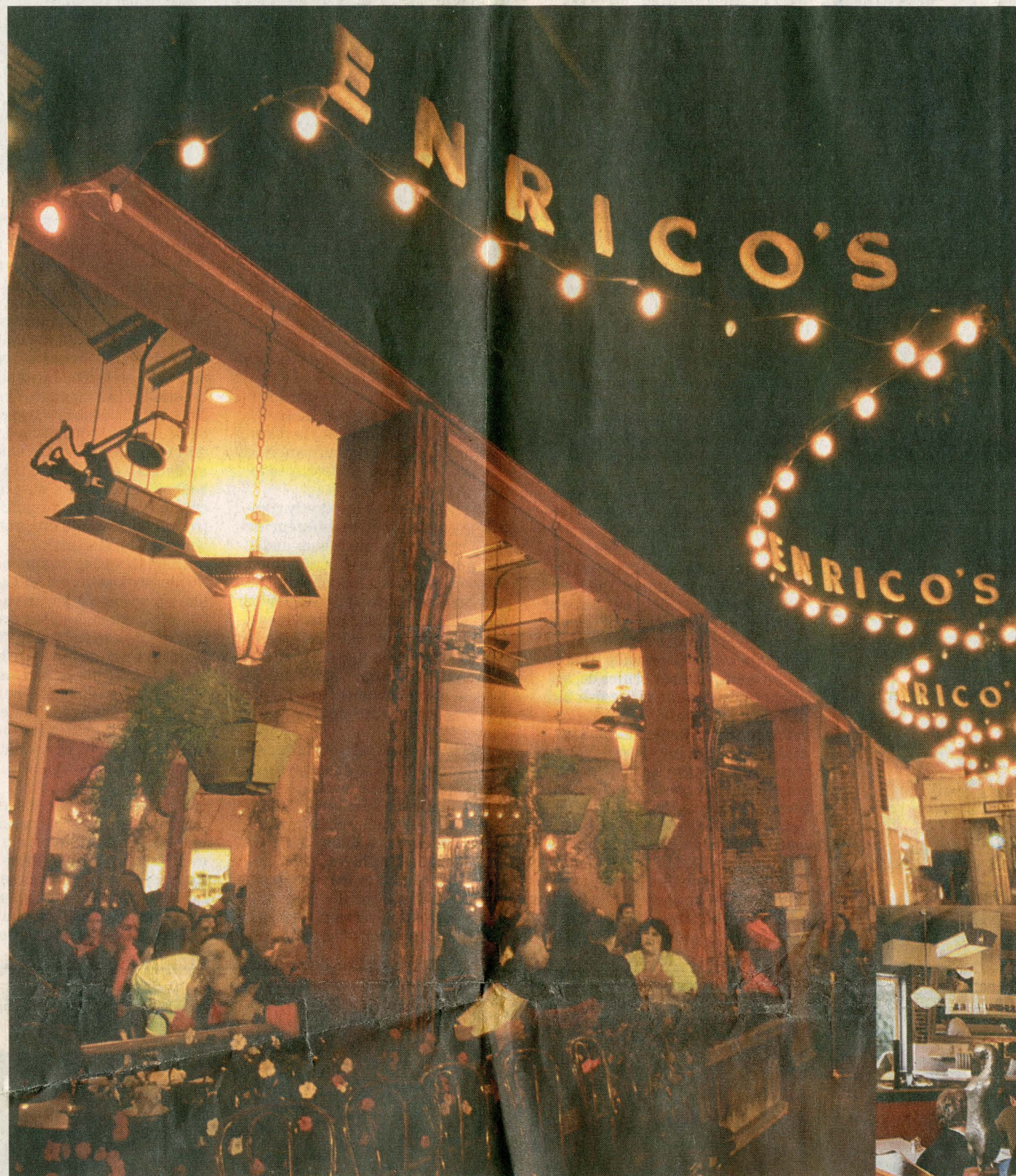
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By the early 80's, it was impossible to go into any of the neighborhood places without being bombarded by a standard lament: the neighborhood was disappearing. Storefronts stood empty, one by one the restaurants started to close, and even the cafes seemed sad.

The people who loved North Beach began to anticipate its demise.

And then, something remarkable happened: North Beach reinvented itself through food.

It started slowly, with a restaurant here



A SENSE OF PLACE In the North Beach area of San Francisco, the Rose Pistola restaurant pays tribute to the original residents with its antipasti, above left. The venerable Enrico's, above, has a new menu and new energy. The Black Cat, right, is a casual spot. Top, Coit Tower looms over the neighborhood.

Photographs by Terrence McCarthy for The New York Times



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Culinary Lights: North Beach Shines Again

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the area's literary past. North Beach feels raucous, alive, vibrant. It feels loved.

Nowhere do you get a better sense of this than at the corner of Broadway and Kearny Street, the gateway to North Beach. On the north side of the street, **ENRICO'S**, one of the area's most venerable institutions, has been given a new lease on life. Although Enrico Banducci made a valiant effort to keep it going, the restaurant died in the 80's. It stood empty for a while, and then Rick Hackett, Meredith Melville and Mark McCloud, who have worked at the East Bay's best restaurants (Olivetto, Chez Pannisse and Bay Wolf), bought the building and pumped in money, energy and spirit. They upgraded the food and wine while leaving the restaurant's raffish energy intact.

There is almost no time of the day or night when the joint doesn't jump.

In the daytime, people sit outside eating spaghetti and salads. At night, wisecracking waitresses thread their way through the crowded room, delivering baked goat cheese salads with baby spinach and grilled pork ribs. Lamb chops from the trendy Niman Ranch are cooked in a wood-burning oven, and potatoes are mashed with rivers of butter. The food is more likable than fabulous, but the room has a raw energy that is fueled by live jazz and a sense of history. Looking around, you expect Jack Kerouac to show up any moment.

Enrico's, 504 Broadway; (415) 982-6223. Dinner main courses, \$11.95 to \$22.25.

When the **BLACK CAT** opened just across the street in June, the city's outspoken May-

or, Willie Brown, reportedly looked around the room and said, "Well, they finally named a restaurant after me." Indeed; few restaurants fit so perfectly into their neighborhoods.

"Like Broadway," the menu says, "Black Cat celebrates the uneasy pot that never quite melts — San Francisco." The owner, Reed Hearon, conceived the casual restaurant as a tribute to Broadway, filling the menu with dishes from the neighborhood's past. The food honors Chinatown with dishes like brightly colored chow mein with roast duck, chanterelles and Chinese chives and

A place that's raucous, vibrant, loved.

soothing salmon jook, a thick rice chowder with ginger and shiitake mushrooms.

But the real winner among the Chinese-style dishes is spot prawns, fished live from a tank and poached simply in the Cantonese style. To New Yorkers unfamiliar with the big, succulent West Coast prawns (which are often laden with roe), they are a special treat. The tank also houses Dungeness crabs, which are cooked in the Chinese manner (black beans, ginger and scallions) or the Italian (spiced and served atop spaghetti).

The Italian food tends to be more delicate than the heavily sauced, garlicky food I remember from the old North Beach. There is, for instance, a wonderful frito misto of artichokes and fennel with shaved Parme-

san, fragile ravioli filled with red snapper and wild greens, and an awesome capponada that does not remotely resemble the similarly named Sicilian eggplant salad. A robust mixture of soaked bread, greens, tiny tomatoes, tuna, anchovies, olives and hard-boiled eggs, capponada is a Lenten dish that I found absolutely irresistible.

This being San Francisco, you can also get sand dabs with tartar sauce or a fine rib eye steak for two, on the bone. And for dessert, be sure not to miss the donut holes filled with apricot or ricotta cheese.

Black Cat, 501 Broadway; (415) 981-2233. Dinner main courses, \$9.50 to \$25.

Mr. Hearon's other restaurant, **ROSE PISTOLA**, is also a conscious tribute to the neighborhood. Named for one of the "old stoves" of North Beach (Mr. Hearon traded Mrs. Pistola, 87, a permanent table for the use of her name), it is a chic, modern homage to the Ligurian people who first populated North Beach.

Meals begin with little plates bearing clear, mingled flavors. Shaved artichokes are dotted with fava beans and tossed with lemon and parsley.

Crostini are laden with prosciutto, bright green leaves of arugula and figs grilled until they melt into the crescenza cheese on top. Sardines are grilled and drizzled with lemon. And rabbit livers are wrapped in pancetta, skewered with rosemary and painted with tapenade.

There are various pizzas and a few pasta dishes, and at the heart of the menu are meat and fish simply grilled or roasted. But the real triumph of Rose Pistola is the cioppino — a huge silver pot of San Francisco's famous seafood stew, rich with crab, mussels, rockfish and calamari. Ladled into beautiful blue bowls, it is how the stuff at Fisherman's Wharf longs to taste.

For dessert there is another local treasure, sacripantina. The original, a specialty of the nearby Stella Bakery, is a fluffy blond cake that is as light as air. The Rose Pistola version is denser, richer and, as far as I am concerned, an improvement.

Rose Pistola, 532 Columbus Avenue; (415) 399-0499. Main courses, \$9.50 to \$24.50.

If Rose Pistola is a tribute to the past, the four-month-old **TAVOLINO** is an ode to the future. A beautifully designed room with walls washed with colors and trimmed in warm woods, it has hand-blown glass lamps hanging over granite counters.

The air, in this re-creation of a Venetian bacaro — a place serving the little snacks called cicchetti (pronounced chee-KET-tee) — is rich with garlic and olive oil. The wine list is wonderful. And the food is surprising, savory, very delicious. Is there anyone who could resist crisp brown little marbles that turn out to be fried olives stuffed with anchovies?

These little snacks are so good that it is easy to find yourself eating more than you



Terrence McCarthy for The New York Times

Homage to a city's heritage: Grilled lobster and shoestring potatoes at the Black Cat.

intended. House-made sausages are served with polenta. Grilled nectarines are framed by rosy slices of prosciutto and sweet, floppy chunks of Taleggio cheese. The leaves of arugula on top are the perfect accent. I love the spicy olive-oil-braised green beans and the crisp, long rectangles of soft polenta punctuated by Gorgonzola cheese.

Other terrific little tastes include seabass in saor, a classic Venetian sweet and sour sauce, and tramezzini, pressed triangles of sandwich with interesting fillings like portobello mushrooms and goat Cheddar.

Even desserts are impressive: I like the polenta tart with pears and raspberries so

little place that has recaptured the old spirit of the neighborhood. There are just eight tables, only cash is accepted and all the cooking is done in the pizza oven. The choice of wines is limited to five bottles, none more than \$20. "Have the sangiovese," our waitress told us, matter of factly, "it's better than the Chianti."

We took her advice on the food as well. And so we had cipolline in agrodolce — little onions simmered with vinegar, sugar and oregano — that were spare and good. Grilled sweet peppers were slicked with olive oil, garlic and parsley. Speck, an Italian ham, was paired with fat white beans, arugula and shavings of Parmesan to make a robust and satisfying way to start a meal.

The pizzas are fine, there is a robust, roasted meat of the day (served with potatoes) and good polenta, roasted in the oven with Gorgonzola. A different baked pasta is pulled from the oven each day.

The food is hearty, uncomplicated and very satisfying, and the prices are astonishingly low. The great ricotta cheese cake costs just \$3 and the espresso, which costs \$1.50, is served with biscotti.

Looking around the sweet little restaurant, you could easily persuade yourself that nothing had changed in North Beach. When the ghosts gather to play bocce in front of the church across the street, I am sure they are smiling.

L'Osteria del Forno, 519 Columbus Avenue; (415) 982-1124. Dishes from \$3.75 to \$9.25.

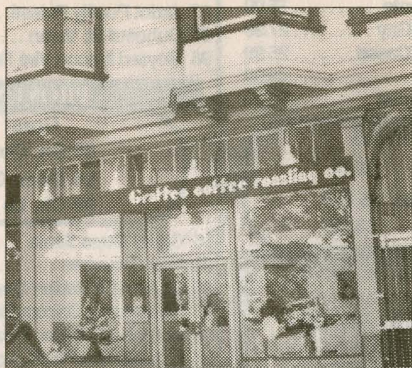
A Taste of North Beach, to Go

"Where are you from?" the owner of the Graffeo Coffee Roasting Company asks when you walk in the door. The air is filled with the rich aroma of roasting beans. You take a deep breath and fill your lungs with the scent. "New York," you say.

He looks at you with pity. "You have fabulous restaurants," he finally manages to say. And then he can't resist adding, "But the coffee they serve!" His eyes are so sad that they seem to be asking how you can stand to live in a place that serves such terrible swirl.

For a moment you wonder as much yourself. And so you buy a few pounds of beans, hoping to take San Francisco home with you.

To me, Graffeo coffee — rich, full and never bitter — is the taste of North



Terrence McCarthy for The New York Times

Beach. Graffeo, 735 Columbus Avenue, will mail coffee beans, in dark and light roasts, for \$9.75 a pound plus shipping: (800) 222-6250. **RUTH REICHL**