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La Merenda

When we pulled up in front of La Merenda, my friend and I looked at each other and said, "Huh?" "I think it's the wrong address," I said. "This can't be it. Let's see if the door's open and I'll take a peek."

Was I wrong! A quick glance into the bar was all we needed to park and enter. From the street it looks something like a biker bar, but that façade conceals one of Milwaukee's most exciting new restaurants. If the name La Merenda sounds Mexican, it's not; it comes from Italian and means a snack, something to share. So we did.

"Do you know about small plates?" our server asked. Most likely we could have figured that out when we saw the \$2.75 La Merenda Club Sandwich or the Meatball Sandwich for \$2.25. Even at those outrageously low prices we were given generous portions. It's essentially a tapas bar with a fascinating menu that encircles the globe. I hope all the servers took lessons in patience; decisions don't come quickly here. We opted for France (Croquet-monsieur), Italy (La Merenda Salad), Indonesia (Sambal Goreng Udang) and Mexico (Pastel Tres Leches with pineapple). Our server brought extra plates — we shared and devoured every scrap of food on those plates. The layers of ham in the Croquet-monsieur were tender and the accompanying salad, arugula with pine nuts, strawberries and Gorgonzola, was perfectly dressed with balsamic vinaigrette. The shrimp in the dish from Indonesia was so fresh and tender it was almost sweet and the Tres Leches (three-milk cake), was a sublime finish, not too drippy, just moist, surrounded by bits of pineapple and fresh mint.

I applaud owners Pete Sadroni and Nick and Melissa Cataldo's vision. They turned a former cabinet maker's workshop into a notable restaurant. — Cari Taylor-Carlson

La Merenda is at 125 E. National Ave., Milwaukee (414) 389-0125