

EATSBEAT

By: Irene Sax

Caffe' Linda is too good to be true. Sure, there are hundreds of inexpensive pasta places around. But this one has golden walls, excellent food, more-than-decent wine, and service that is both charming and able. Despite the low prices for this neighborhood, they give you a tomato-topped bruschetta when you sit down and send you off with a couple of sticks of gum.

It's hard to pick one part of the menu when everything is so good. Yes, the appetizers are fine, especially warm squid cut thin and sautéed with red pepper flakes and bits of avocado (\$9.95). Salads are fresh and abundant, whether you have your greens topped with diced red beets and shavings of ricotta salata (\$6.95) or with walnuts, apples and grated Gorgonzola cheese (\$8.95). Order a half carafe of the house Chianti, and it will be poured in rustic Italian cups.

The pastas in big white bowls are dressed Italian-style, which means that they're cloaked, not drowning, in sauce. Rigatoni primavera is a bowl full of flavorful tomato sauce, dense with vegetable chunks (\$9.95); gnocchi Bolognese (\$12.95) are a bit doughy, but rescued by the hearty meat sauce. The carbonara is an elegantly rich toss of noodles, bacon and cream. If you're going to overdo it, this is the way to go (\$10.95).

If you don't want pasta at lunch, you could choose a pressed sandwich on a baguette, maybe the one called "Best Bet" that's made with dried cured beef, goat cheese and aru-

gula drizzled with truffle oil (\$7.95). At dinner, the grilled salmon (\$12.95) is moist under its seared crust and served with roasted potatoes and vegetables. Fresh? Of course.

If this wasn't enough, Caffe' Linda is just a bus ride from the Theater District, making it a super place to eat before a play. As I said, too good to be true.