



Alba

BY CAROL MAYBACH

★★★★

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THE DRAW

A Boulder favorite updates its name, location, and focus.

THE DRAWBACK

Some new dishes are too ambitious; risotto and gnocchi often have problems with texture.

DON'T MISS

Crispy polenta with grilled Anjou pear; crispy duck with soft polenta, seasonal vegetables, and kiln-dried cherry sauce

VEGETARIAN OPTIONS

Roasted red pepper-tomato soup, vegetarian pizzas, roasted golden beet salad

WHEN A RESTAURANT CLOSES, it usually marks the end of a hard-fought run. But in the case of Boulder's Full Moon Grill, closing for a month served as a new beginning. When the longtime northern Italian favorite reopened in August, it was brandishing a new name (Alba), a new location (just north of McGuckin Hardware), and a tighter focus.

Open since 1992, Full Moon Grill's subterranean dining room, tight quarters, and viewless bar were in need of a face-lift. When



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THAT'S AMORE Alba's popular crispy polenta with grilled Anjou pear.

owner Rick Stein learned that Full Moon's leased space was to be incorporated into a new supermarket, he had a choice to either close for good or move to another spot nearby—one that was spacious, brand-new, and had views of the Flatirons. It was a no-brainer—especially in light of competition from glossy Italian eateries such as Frasca Food and Wine, Radda Trattoria, and Laudisio.

Stein also took this opportunity to rename the restaurant. Full Moon's ambiguous name often confused diners (many walk-ins thought it was a Chinese restaurant), but Alba references the medieval city in Italy's Piedmont region known for its Nebbiolo grapes and rich gastronomic heritage. The new name clearly reflects the restaurant's refined focus, drawing diners interested in the culinary traditions of northern Italy.

Perhaps one of the most exciting upgrades

at Alba is Stein's commitment to building the best Piedmontese wine list in Boulder. With a strong emphasis on Barberas, Barbarescos, Nebbiolos, and Barolos, he is well on his way to achieving his goal.

In light of the changes, chef Greg Keesy also reworked parts of Alba's menu. He tightened combinations, incorporated authentic Piedmont ingredients (more truffles, balsamic vinegar, and polenta), and worked in Colorado product—thus capturing the focus on fresh ingredients that's inherent in Italian cuisine.

Take the linguine, for example. On the old menu this pasta often appeared with fresh Maine lobster, spicy artichoke, and sweet garlic—a confusing dish that had little to do with northern Italy. Now, however, the savory combination of forest mushrooms, duck confit, and Alba white truffle butter

combines with the al dente linguine (\$9). It's a dish that's both delicious and representative of Piedmont.

Keesy also fiddled with the grilled Colorado rib-eye (\$29), removing the salsa verde and letting the inch-thick cut of beef speak for itself.

On the other hand, Stein and Keesy showed restraint in updating longtime favorites from Full Moon's menu. One of the cherished standbys is the crispy polenta and grilled Anjou pear antipasto (\$9). This dish plays off contrasts with lightly grilled pears, crispy polenta, and a savory Gorgonzola dolce latte sauce (with toasted pine nuts, tomato concasse, and chopped parsley) ladled on top. The starter, which dates back to the days when former chef Bradford Heap manned the kitchen, hasn't changed a bit since the day it appeared on the menu.

Another mainstay (also from Heap's era) is the pan-seared duck breast (\$20) with crispy skin and perfectly seasoned, medium-rare meat. Creamy polenta, seasonal vegetables, and a sweet-tart kiln-dried cherry sauce accompany the duck.

The common denominator in the old standbys is the cooking of Bradford Heap,

a James Beard nominee for best chef of the Southwest, who left the restaurant in the fall of 2006 to open Colterra Food and Wine in Niwot. The 28-year-old Keesy, however, trained under Heap when he was hired fresh out of culinary school. The two worked side by side at Full Moon, as well as at the Chautauqua Dining Hall (Stein's other venture). Keesy was a quick study, learning Heap's tried-and-true recipes.

As top toque, Keesy may not show quite as much depth as his predecessor in creating timeless entrées, but over time he tinkers and fine-tunes to great success. Currently he's addressing issues such as inconsistent risotto and gnocchi, and working to simplify dishes such as the vegetable pappardelle and the butternut squash cannelloni. Some of the best new additions to the menu are his hand-tossed pizzas, which pair an excellent thin crust with clear, well-matched flavors of spicy coppo, fresh mozzarella, and caramelized red onion. The simplicity of this offering stays true to Italian tradition while connecting with the refined tastes of modern diners.

Alba's seasoned service also resonates with diners. From being greeted at the hostess

stand to sitting down at the table, the service is warm and experienced—traits that come naturally to a staff that has worked with Stein for an average of five years. This longevity results in a tightly choreographed team with excellent timing, menu savvy, and a lack of pretension.

Flawless service, new digs, and a renewed focus give Alba a fighting chance in a market flooded with Italian restaurants. As for what sets Alba apart, Stein says, "Time and time again people tell me how much they enjoy having a place where they can really have a conversation. We worked hard to create a quiet, elegant atmosphere where people can connect, even when the bar and the dining room are completely full." In Italian, the word Alba means "dawn"—and it seems a perfect metaphor for this Boulder restaurant's new awakening. ▲

ABOUT OUR RATINGS

4 Stars: Outstanding. One of the very best of its kind. **3 Stars:** Very good. A restaurant you'll want to visit again and again. **2 Stars:** Good. Hardly worth a special trip, but, hey, you gotta eat. **1 Stars:** Fair. An eatery with serious flaws, be it in the quality of the food or the service. Or both. **0 Stars:** Don't bother.

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MODEL SEARCH





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