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# Arts & Dining

## Acqua al Due

Florence arrives at Eastern Market

By CELESTE MCCALL

So you can come home again—and do very well. Ari Gejdenson, who grew up on Capitol Hill, spent eight years in Italy before returning to his home turf to unveil our newest Italian restaurant: Acqua al Due (2). Located across from Eastern Market in the space formerly occupied by Dottie's Boutique and A&A Athletic, Acqua al 2 arrived May 8. This is Acqua's first East coast venture; the 4-member group has a sister restaurant in San Diego's Gaslamp Quarter, which opened in 2000. At first we thought the watery-sounding moniker referred to seafood, but that is not the case. (More about Acqua's fishy offerings later.) We then learned the name comes from the original's address in Florence, Italy: Via dell' Acqua Ni2, near the Arno.

Capitol Hill's Acqua al 2 sports a pale yellow brick facade, and the rustic interior is reminiscent of Tuscan trattorias. The Washington partner/chef is 28-year-old Ari Gejdenson, who grew up playing soccer a few blocks away. His passion for the sport took him to Bolivia—then across the pond to Firenze, where he opened—of all things—an American eatery called Ari's Diner. "I saw the need for a late-night place that served American food," Gejdenson explained. "So we served blueberry pancakes, omelettes, fried chicken, burgers, milkshakes." Since his fellow soccer players and many co-workers spoke no English, Ari soon became fluent in Italian.

Along with business partner Ralph Lee, a life-long friend and fellow Hill native, Gejdenson teamed up with the owners of Florence's famous Acqua al Due, which dates from 1978. "They wanted younger people involved," said Gejdenson, whom they hired as a cook. He worked there



TOP TO BOTTOM:  
Rigatoni alla Melanzane, a tube-shaped pasta with a sauce of tomato and eggplant, mozzarella and Parmesan cheeses. Photo: Andrew Lightman

Acqua- Gianni Ravera, Ralph Lee and Ari Gejdenson with a signature Antipasto Toscano. Photo: Andrew Lightman

three years before deciding to return to his home town. "I wanted to move back here, and I wanted to bring my favorite restaurant with me," he said.

"It took a long time to find a location, but my real estate agent showed me this space and I fell in love with it," Ari said. Renovation involved totally gutting and renovating the building. Seating a total of 100, the restaurant has two comfortable dining areas plus a handsome copper-covered bar. Later this summer, look for an al fresco sidewalk section.

Back inside, the handsome decor is partly the work of contractor Scott Kneper. "We worked together, creating as we saw brick walls being exposed," said Gejdenson. The walls are now plastered with large white ceramic plates, autographed by family, friends, soccer stars, Redskins and politicians including House Speaker Nancy Pelosi who has dined at the restaurant several times already. More than likely, the Speaker has ordered one of Acqua's most popular dishes: assaggio di primi (a sampling of five pastas) or filetto aceto balsamico (filet mignon glazed with balsamic vinegar). Also well received is the filet topped with blueberry sauce.

When we asked why the regular menu did not offer seafood (except for a smoked salmon appetizer), Gejdenson explained: The menu in the

Florence restaurant lists no fish but carries lots of steak and pasta (Tuscany is known for its excellent beef). But the Hill spinoff does offer specials such as grilled catch-of-the-day.

Located at 212-214 Seventh St. SE, Acqua Al Due is open nightly for dinner, with plans to eventually add lunch and brunch service. Call 202-525-4375. The closest Metro is Eastern Market (Orange/Blue lines). ★