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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Osteria Mozza just might be worth the wait

It's tough to get a table at the hyped new Italian restaurant, but take any reservation you can get.

By S. Irene Virbila, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

AT the new, white-hot Osteria Mozza, next door to its more humble *cugino*, Pizzeria Mozza, it's quite the bustle. Phones ring. Passers-by peer in the windows. Italophiles, and fans of Mario Batali and Nancy Silverton, arrive early for their fiercely held reservations. Anybody who managed to snag one the first couple of weeks has bragging rights in spades -- and the patience (or that of a dogged assistant) to dial the number again and again, only to hear that the only tables available are at the uncovetable hours of 5:30 or 11:15. That's p.m. I can't think of a time I've ever been offered a table at that hour in Los Angeles.

That said, I walked in late one night to find four empty spots at the no-reservations mozzarella bar just waiting for some hungry folks to fill them. This is Silverton's domain, where she turns out wonderful little bites based on mozzarella or its close cousin, *burrata*. The bar is L-shaped, with a broad white marble top that feels as roomy as a proper table. Depending on availability, she's serving balls of *burrata* from Basilicata tied off at the top with a strand of raffia, or the real thing from Puglia, creamy at the center, and served with *fett'unta* (oiled bread) atop stewed leeks. I love the *crostini* covered with creamy fresh cheese, currants and pine nuts, and crowned with braised artichokes that look like exotic flowers. There's also a terrific grilled cheese panino of molten *scamorza* with salami and fiery cherry peppers.

But you can order anything from the regular menu at the bar too. And from the mozzarella bar at the tables. The big Osteria menu is where Batali -- the ponytailed chef in the orange clogs -- swaggers in from stage left with his crispy pigs' trotters patty or delectable grilled octopus with potatoes, celery and lemon. The rich, heavily sauced pastas bear his unmistakable stamp too. *Cacio e pepe*, linguine tossed with pecorino cheese and lots of coarsely ground black pepper, is overwhelmed in butter. Delicious housemade *orecchiette* ("little ears") are sauced in enough crumbled pork sausage and Swiss chard to feed the entire table. The ingenue, though, is the single square raviolo filled with fresh ricotta and napped in brown butter.

On the floor, everything was running smoothly for a restaurant just over a week old. All the servers had to attend a four-day boot camp to instill them with Osteria's -- and the Mario Batali-Joe Bastianich restaurant machine's -- philosophy. They've got the food down cold, giving the impression they've tasted every dish, because if you ask any question, you'll get a correct answer. That's impressive.

The sommelier and junior sommeliers circle the room, opening bottles, pouring wine from a list of Italian heavy hitters. As the evening wears on, the room almost seems to levitate in a haze of wine and conversation. Talk gets louder and more animated. The rock soundtrack climbs a notch, and the more connected get busy table-hopping. As the last bite of pasta or roast pork *arista* is eaten, and the *torta della nonna* passes muster, there's a sigh of relief.

The most anticipated restaurant in recent memory is open. And it's pretty good. In a couple of months, given the track record of the partners involved -- Batali, Bastianich and Silverton -- Osteria Mozza may override the hype and turn the L.A. Italian dining scene on its head.

If that comes to pass, take any reservation you can get.

virbila@latimes.com

Osteria Mozza

Where: 6602 Melrose Ave., L.A.

When: 5:30 p.m. to midnight Mondays through Saturdays

Price: Antipasti, \$10 to \$16; mozzarella bar items, \$12 to \$20; *primi*, \$17 to \$19; *secondi*, \$26 to \$29; *contorni* (sides), \$7; cheese plates, \$12; *dolci* (desserts), \$8 to \$12. Corkage, \$20 with two-bottle limit per table.

Info: (323) 297-0100, www.mozza-la.com