

RESTAURANT REVIEW

Osteria Mozza: Be very hungry

Ringo H.W. Chiu / For The Times

FROM THE MOZZA BAR: Stracciatella with celery and herbs.

Grab a seat at the bar and jump right in at Silverton and Batali's lively, high-spirited new spot.

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October 31, 2007



THE white marble counter top veined in gray is cool to the touch. I take a sip of Vermentino, enjoying its delicate minerality, and look over the menu at Osteria Mozza, which might be the hardest reservation in town right now. But for me, the best seat in the house has to be one in the middle of the room at the L-shaped "mozzarella bar," where you can't even make a reservation -- it's first come, first served.

And it's the best perch from which to take in the entire riveting scene. You'd never find an *osteria* like this anywhere in Italy. It's more fun, for one thing, very urban and high-spirited. Four-month-old Osteria Mozza, next door to the smaller, more casual Pizzeria Mozza, doesn't try to re-

create Italy. Instead of nostalgia, Nancy Silverton and Mario Batali give you something real and direct. And instead of the tried and true, it's a riff on Italian cuisine from two of America's best chefs, with Joe Bastianich, son of Lidia, as the third partner.



Rich



The night is young

The mozzarella bar is Silverton's novel take on antipasti: Everything is based on Italian fresh cheeses. She and Batali (who drops in from New York from time to time) and chef Matt Molina (who runs the kitchen and worked with Silverton at Campanile) have come up with some trump cards for the *osteria's* full menu too.

From my perch at the bar, I can see bowls filled with lemons or olives, *la mozzarella*, and the other ingredients Silverton uses in her meditations on cheese. She's behind the counter most nights, turning out beguiling little dishes. The most interesting people are hanging here -- and hanging onto their seats. The idea of a quick bite can easily turn into a couple of hours. It's dangerous sitting here: You get very, very hungry watching her plate the dishes.

Every meal here begins with a complimentary *stuzzichino*, or pick-me-up, a spiral of mozzarella rolled with sweet basil leaves, dried tomato and olives drizzled with sharp, green olive oil.

Suddenly, I'm craving more cheese, specifically the *bufala mozzarella* flown in from southern Italy, this one from Basilicata. It's a bulbous packet, tied at the top with string, absolutely sumptuous in its simplicity. This is the real thing, mozzarella so fresh it's practically weeping milk, presented with braised leeks and some *fett'unta* (oiled bread, or toast) to set it off.

Preening at the door

BETWEEN bites, I'm taking in the crowd, a wild mix of ages and styles that only a city like L.A. or New York can produce. Come early, come late, the

place is alive. Just watch the entrance. Everybody wakes up and preens a little the minute they walk in the door. And though the place is casual, they're dressed to impress. Parties waiting for a table lurk at the "*amaro bar*" at the back, sipping Prosecco or obscure Italian bitters as they survey the room, hoping for that quiet(er) table in the corner, or that deuce not two feet from some famous face.

Meanwhile, at the bar, Silverton serves up toast slathered in creamy *burricotti* crowned with braised artichokes, currants, pine nuts and a fragrant mint pesto, incorporating the Arab-influenced flavors of Sicily.

For a late-night snack, she's got a *scamorza panino* with Armandino Batali's (Mario's dad's) *salame* and heat-generating cherry peppers. Or *stracciatella*, a soft cheese, with fresh, crisp celery, scallions and a refreshing herb salad. I love the mozzarella in *carozza*, squat rectangles of cheese dressed in anchovies and lemon then breaded and fried.

Sheep's-milk ricotta is terrific too. Like the mozzarella, it has to be served absolutely fresh, or it's not worth your while. When Silverton gets it in, she might serve a mound of the fragile fresh cheese with a little lemon zest and some lightly toasted hazelnuts.

Batali, who with Bastianich owns a bevy of restaurants in New York (and a notable one in Las Vegas) weighs in with his own antipasti. Some I recognize from Babbo in New York or B&B in Vegas. Batali has made his mark with his swashbuckling take on Italian cuisine. The big guy did time in Emilia Romagna, land of pork, butter and cream, and that region's taste for rich cuisine has its imprint all over his cooking. And his food makes no concessions for our summer weight climate. It's big, bold and brash, with flavors cranked up to the max.

Ready for more antipasti? How about crispy pig trotter? It's not what you think. The pig has been boned, the luscious chunks of pork formed into a patty and fried to a golden crisp. Served with *cicoria* (chicory) and a dollop of hard-working mustard, it's rich and filling. Fat octopus tentacles charred on the grill taste tender and sweet, served with a straightforward salad of potatoes, celery and lemon.

Tripe *alla Parmigiana* is ribbons of tripe slow-braised in tomato sauce to achieve a wonderful velvety texture that melts in your mouth. And I can't stay away from the sumptuous grilled figs swaddled in pancetta and

served with some wilted dandelion greens.

For something on the lighter side, consider the little gem lettuce salad. It's a stunner, perfectly dressed and adorned with little gobbets of *Gorgonzola dolce*, toasted hazelnuts, sliced egg just this side of soft-boiled and fluttery, fried pieces of pancetta. You don't have to go further than the antipasti to realize this is one Italian kitchen using the best ingredients money can buy.

The service is a cut above the usual L.A. Italian too. Walk into Osteria Mozza and you won't have to wonder who's in charge. General manager David Rosoff, formerly of Michael's and Campanile, is a blur as he rushes from dining room to kitchen and back again. He's running both the Pizzeria next door and this much bigger spot (with a much more extensive menu), troubleshooting, soothing egos, running interference with the kitchen, and generally running a very tight ship. Almost too tight.

Service may be overly efficient with so many waiters, junior sommeliers and managers patrolling the floor; it can be a little nervous making. Even so, servers can sometimes seem rushed to take your order, and if you don't specifically ask the kitchen to slow it down between courses, for my taste, the food can come out too fast.

I want to savor *tortellini e brodo*, the classic pasta stuffed with prosciutto and cheese with a rich, gold poultry stock poured over the top. Without the distraction of sauce, you can taste every nuance of the filling. Fresh ricotta and egg *raviolo* is a single ravioli 4 inches square, the pasta draped over the mounded ricotta like a tablecloth, the whole thing sitting in a moat of very brown sage butter. Cut into it with your fork and the gold egg yolk flows out, mixing with the cheese and butter, making this a perfect dish with an exceptional white wine, like the Vermentino we drank that had just come onto the list.

Farfalle -- big, handmade butterflies with wild spinach, dusky gold chanterelles and walnuts -- looks beautiful on the plate. The pasta itself is delicious, but not as much as it would be if there weren't so much butter. I have the same criticism of the *cacio e pepe* -- linguine with black pepper and pecorino, though it has much less butter than it did when the restaurant first opened.

Delectable quail

AFTER all that richness, *gnocchi al pomodoro* comes as a relief. Why did I never order this before? The olive-sized gnocchi are light as can be, served in a delightful, loose tomato sauce with ribbons of basil, and ricotta *salata* shaved over at the table. Spaghetti with clams and pancetta with a really hot, Fresno chile pesto is a real wake-up dish, and one I find myself craving to eat again. The lineup of *primi*, which here means pasta, doesn't seem to change much from week to week, at least so far.

Neither do the main courses. If you favor the quail or the *orata*, that's a very good thing. Two delectable little quail are bandaged in pancetta, grilled so that they're tender and juicy inside, and served with braised radicchio, the bitterness mitigated by a touch of honey. The combination is genius. *Orata* is grilled whole, wrapped in a fig leaf, and when the packet is opened, drizzled with a little excellent olive oil.



Rich



The night is young

If you want to take advantage of some of the stellar reds on the fine Italian wine list, though, *brasato* is your go-to dish. It's a single, tall slab of beef, a proper cut for braising, with plenty of good beefy texture that flakes like brisket. It comes with a scoop of hearty polenta, the red wine reduction and a gremolata of fresh horseradish, a dish from a cook who really understands braising.

Arista, though, is puzzling. The roasted pork has been brined, so it tastes a bit like ham with an off-putting, almost jellied texture as if it's been poached or steamed rather than roasted. Its thick rim of fat isn't really browned either. *Scottadita*, "burn your fingers" lamb chops, weren't hot enough to even warm your pinkies. The lamb itself is top-notch, but these chops need more of a char: They're limp, in fact. But I love the accompaniment of *fregola sarda* (something like Israeli couscous) sharp with parsley and

garlic.

Contorni, or sides, offer enough to keep any vegetarians in the house interested. Highlights include the roasted, smashed fingerlings with lots of crisp skin and rosemary twigs buried in the mix. Yellow green beans are tucked under a coverlet of breadcrumbs. And fresh flageolet beans are revved up with cherry tomatoes and Sicilian oregano.

Meanwhile, the wine list offers a wealth of cutting-edge and traditional Italian wines. Under wine director Jared Heber, it's a work in progress. On every visit, there's something new and intriguing on the list. It could be that old vines Vermentino, a lovely Fiano di Avellino from Campania, or a terrific Barbera from Piedmont. Temperatures are correct, and everybody in the house knows how to pour a wine.

OK, OK, if anyone is expecting the pomp and circumstance of Valentino, he or she is going to be sorely disappointed. Osteria Mozza is casual and very, very loud. The soundtrack is pure, old-school rock 'n' roll. But with its high energy and high spirits, the *osteria* is also more fun than any other Italian place in town (with the exception of Pizzeria Mozza next door).

With Silverton involved, you can expect fabulous desserts. Pastry chef Dahlia Narvaez turns out delicate little cannoli stuffed with three different ice creams. Warm *bombolini* fritters come with lemon mascarpone and raspberry sorbetto. *Torta della nonna* sets a new standard here as a fine-textured cheesecake served with a trio of honeys that go from pale to dark, each strewn with a few choice pine nuts.

Who can resist the crescent-shaped *cornette* stuffed with almond paste and escorted by plum compote and a tart Greek yogurt gelato? It's a good one to share, because it's very filling and rich. But my favorite is a new introduction, petite pears poached in a luscious dessert wine and served with a fabulous, bitter almond gelato.

At close to midnight on a Saturday, the room is just beginning to empty. We get up from our table, and the couple lingering over coffee in front of the windows with the neon of the Jiffy Lube sign behind could be posing for an Edward Hopper painting. I can't believe how long we've stayed, and this somehow happens every time I go to Osteria Mozza. No worries. I'm learning, along with the rest of L.A.'s Italophiles, that the night, here at least, is still young.