

La Pentola's Family Supper Series spotlights flavours of Northern Italy

BY ED LAU
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Image: Ed Lau/Vancity Buzz

For much of my life, the entirety of what I knew as Italian food was spaghetti and pizza. Actually, I think that's what most people on this side of the world think is Italian food. It wasn't until my first visit to Italy nearly 10 years ago that I figured out how rich and varied Italian cuisine really was. It's a style that emphasizes natural flavours, focusing on bringing out the best in fresh ingredients...and each region has their favourites when it comes to fresh ingredients.

The Sunday Supper Series at La Pentola shows off the cooking of Northern Italy, which generally differs from Southern Italy in their lessened use of olive oils and tomatoes and prominence of risotto, polenta and filled pastas.



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La Pentola is located in downtown Vancouver's Opus Hotel and serves handmade pasta, meat and fish dishes inspired by Northern Italy.



Like all *The Fast and the Furious* movies, La Pentola is all about family. While you can order individual plates, the menu encourages you to order family-style and share food around the table.



The Family Supper Series happens on the last Sunday of each month. The special \$55, multi-course menu varies depending on the season as well as who's in the kitchen. [May's event](#) featured chef Stuart Lane of Seattle's Cascina Spinasse, who joined chef Travis McCord in creating a menu inspired by both restaurants.



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My dining companion and I sat at a large communal table surrounded by people we didn't know. It was a packed house.



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It's quite amazing how a common love for food sparks conversation amongst people. By the end, we all knew each other's names and Instagram handles. One nice lady from Washington gave me her family's recipe for, and I'm not making this up, *tater tot casserole* after I mentioned I learned how to put tater tots in a waffle iron for awesome tater tot waffles from the Internet. And yes, I will totally make that tater tot casserole because it sounds *delicious*.

Tonight's menu featured the tastes of the sea, starting with a trio of oysters.



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Here we have one each of Kushi, Lighthouse and Royal Miyagi oysters with a dab of horseradish foam and mignonette pearls. Few things are more delicious than fresh, raw oysters. They taste like sea air smells. A deep, rich, ocean-y salinity.



Ed Lau/Vancity Buzz

This beautifully presented carpaccio is made from thinly sliced Pacific octopus and dressed with a Dungeness crab salad, croutons, pickled shallots and Hanna Brook farm greens. The sweet crab salad and crunchy croutons contrast nicely with the octopus. There are a lot of flavours here but they all off-set and balance each other nicely.



As delicious as it is gorgeous, this seared Albacore tuna with Arctic char roe, lemon puree and asparagus was one of my favourites. Look at it. That's a sexy dish. It's seasoned beautifully, using the salty caviar to bring out the natural flavours of the tuna. I also really enjoyed the asparagus and thought it was a good match for the meaty fish.



The best thing about this Sockeye salmon *acqua pazza* with sea asparagus, halibut *gnocchetti* and sorrel is that the fish is prepared simply. Fresh Sockeye salmon is just one of the best things to eat in Vancouver and the kitchen lets the fish speak for itself. The *gnocchetti* was one of my least favourite things of the night, though. I wasn't a fan of the texture and thought they were a tad bland but full marks for the fish and the broth.



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After our *antipasti* dishes, we moved on to our *primi* courses, but I thought I should also mention the bread, which was something I had never seen before. This nori focaccia is great stuff. No names but someone at the table nearly finished an entire box of it on their own. Even though I usually think of bread as just wasted room that could've been used for bacon, I had a couple pieces dipped in the rich, fruity olive oil.



Ed Lau/Vancity Buzz

Polenta usually isn't my thing, but it's the perfect vessel for absorbing all the various flavours and juices from this dish's Manila clams, Salt Spring Island mussels and *arrabbiata* sauce with sausage. Instead of the crusty bread we usually use to sop up all that sauce, we've got a creamy polenta.



And then we got to the pasta and all I can say is...wow. More of this, please. These squid ink *tortellini* filled with baja prawns in a lemon, butter and herb sauce are just perfect. The thickness of the pasta is perfect, as is the cook on it. The sweet, fresh prawns are cooked just so and stay springy and delicious. Stunningly good, like everything is *just* right.



Same goes for this *taglierini* with *bottarga* (grated fish roe that's been dried and cured) and herb bread crumbs. *Amazing*. There's only a couple ingredients but wow, there's so much flavour in this dish.



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The last dish before dessert was a *whole fish*. A lot of tasting menus only give you a few bites of each course but La Pentola seems determined to make sure no one could possibly be hungry. Our communal table had 12 people around it...and four fish. Four rather large fish, finished tableside.



Ed Lau/Vancity Buzz

For a fish baked in salt, the *branzino*, or Mediterranean sea bass isn't as salty as you'd expect. Of course you taste salt, but much of it is chipped away before serving. The crust acts as a barrier, protecting the fish from drying out. The result is an incredibly moist and tender sea bass.



Ed Lau/Vancity Buzz

After such a big meal, dessert is kept relatively light. This saffron and Seville orange-infused cream with blood orange caviar, anise biscotti and pistachios is a light and refreshing way to end the meal.



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We had three different wines with our meal: Bellavista Franciacorta 'cuvée brut', a 2012 Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi, and a 2013 Occhipinti IGT Sicilia SP68, which are as delicious as they are fun to say.



Ed Lau/Vancity Buzz

I always seem to enjoy myself more at meals like this where all the decisions are made for you. Some may prefer to pick for themselves but I like to think that when a chef designs a full tasting menu like this, they are making me the best things they know how to make. It's an opportunity to experience the full creativity of the people in the kitchen.

The Sunday Supper Series is a great menu that takes advantage of our city's amazing seafood and a chef who knows how to bring out the best in delicious sea creatures. At \$55, the price of admission is actually quite a good value considering how good the food is and how full you'll be when you leave. The menu might not be the same as the one above but the kitchen is talented and I'd recommend it if you're looking for something special to do for dinner on Sunday.

Bring friends...or just make some new ones when you're there.

La Pentola

Address: 350 Davie Street (Opus Hotel)

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Website: www.lapentola.ca

Hours: Monday to Sunday: 7 a.m. to 3 p.m., 5 p.m. til late