

ITALIAN * Pasta the Bolognese way

Daily Breeze - Torrance, Calif.

By: Merrill Shindler

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Coccole sits in the Redondo Beach space that was last home to The Little Italian Place -- a pleasant neighborhood eatery with aspirations no grander than serving well-prepared portions of pasta and protein in a pleasantly low-key setting.

Coccole sits in the same understated pair of storefront rooms. But the food created here is logarithmically more ambitious -- this may be the most creative Italian restaurant to ever open in the South Bay. And it announces that ambition on the cover of its menu (designed to look like a school notebook with a marbled cover), where it reads: "Laboratorio del Gusto" -- "Laboratory of Flavors."

It also says "Winter Quarter Menu 2007" on the bottom of the menu, which let's us know the dishes will be changing with the season, though being this is their first season we don't yet know if the change will be across the board, or selective.

It's all up to chef and co-owner Collette Fratesi who, if the Internet is correct, learned her art in Torino, Italy, and as of last year was cooking at Vin Antico in Marin County.

She's a chef who's done very little to adjust to the pasta-and- pizza cooking of Southern California. Virtually every dish on the menu has, if not a twist, at least a touch of her own -- even the bruschetta, a standard on local menus, has a memorable crispness, unsullied by a topping of garlic, olive oil, tomatoes and basil. (It's the first dish on the menu. And it sets the informative style of the menu by noting that, "In the Roman dialect, 'bruscare' means to roast over coals.")

But immediately after, the menu starts heading off the well-trod path, to dishes that are no doubt wholly familiar in Italy, but rarely encountered in the land of the Olive Garden and CPK.

The next appetizer up is "vellutata al pomodoro con mozzarella fresca." "Vellutata" translates, literally, as "velvety"; it's a term often used to describe cream sauces. In this case, it's a velvety tomato soup -- the essence of tomato really -- topped with mozzarella that melts delicately in the broth, with toasted ciabatta bread for chewing or soaking or mopping or whatever you wish.

Then come the sformatinos, a pair of savory flans that are indulgent in the extreme -- they're a bit like eating a pudding made of cream, egg yolks and butter, though they're a bit less caloric than that.

The first of them -- sformatino di verdure bicolore -- is a duplex of a dish, two layers of vegetable flan on a lake of melted fontina cheese (from, the always informative menu notes, Val d'Aosta). The other is sformatino di gorgonzola, which reverses the process of the first. In this case, the flan is made of cheese, and it's drizzled with a broccoli puree. It's simply... amazing, a dish with some many taste and textural complexities it almost gives you palate fatigue. Almost, but not quite.

The appetizers also include one of my longtime favorites, a dish I thought had faded from popular memory. It's called vitello tonnato and on paper, at least, it sounds like a mistake. It consists of thinly sliced, cold beef, topped with a pureed tuna sauce, crowned with capers and a sprinkle of olive oil.

If you think about it for awhile, you'll note that the pantheon of fish-flavored beef dishes is pretty small -- you could fit most of them into a broom closet, and still have room for a mop. As wrong as this dish may sound, the flavors are incredible -- it's a laboratory (rather than a textbook) version of a classic.

Beginning with the appetizers, a number of dishes are annotated with small clocks next to them on the menu, indicating the amount of time needed for preparation. This is a nice touch, though it doesn't apparently factor in the amount of time needed for the dish to get to the kitchen, for the dish to be prepared for cooking, and for the dish to get from the kitchen to your table.

Which brings me to what so far has been the downside of Coccole. Though the food is fascinating, the service isn't quite ready for prime time.

On a recent Saturday night, when the restaurant was nearly full, the service seemed to be on the edge of falling apart. Everything had to be requested -- place settings, water, bread, olive oil, someone to take the order and, perhaps most frustrating of all, the check at the end. (The staff seemed to be having problems with the computerized ordering system.)

Hopefully this will pass. But do be prepared -- at Coccole, you may get a good meal, but it won't necessarily be a fast meal.

Which brings me back to those little clocks. They're found on another "velvety" dish -- the "vellutata di cozze," a peppery tomato broth in which chubby green-lipped mussels do the backstroke, where we discover the dish will take 15 minutes. Ditto the "melanzanina alla parmigiana," which seems to be a fancy name for an upscale version of eggplant Parmesan (or, in this case, eggplant parmigiano reggiano and imported mozzarella, a far better dish than the overcooked thing my mother used to cook for me).

Expect an added wait as well for the linguine with mussels (with a nice sprinkling of chili flakes) and the "lasagnetta di verdure alla norcina," which I'd say was a fancy name for lasagna, except lasagna has neither the lightness nor the complexity of this lovely dish.

Several of the entrees want extra time as well -- the pan-seared duck breast, the sauted halibut, the New Zealand rack of lamb and the grilled Angus ribeye steak (flavored with balsamic vinegar and rosemary-scented olive oil, just like in Tuscany).

If you want to speed things up a bit, let me (highly) suggest the "tagliatelle con ragu alla Bolognese," which is our old friend pasta with meat sauce, only so much better, thanks to the kitchen's commitment to doing it the true Bolognese way, which is with just "a couple of tablespoons of tomato paste." Instead of having pasta moistened with a tomato sauce with a little meat in it, you get a sauce of meat with a little tomato in it -- which changes everything.

There are also two wonderful, long-cooked stews. One is the "bocconcini di maiale ai frutti di bosco," a mouthful of words that translates into a mouthful of pork, sage, carrots, onions, cranberries, blueberries and raspberries with oven-roasted potatoes. Like the vitello tonnato, it may sound a tad odd. But the flavors are brilliant. The other dish is the "brasato ai vini di Torino," which is beef cooked long in red wine and spices.

Both the pork and the beef come with the house potatoes ("Duilio's Recipe"), which are cut into cubes, then fried in butter with rosemary and oregano; even the most hardcore low-carbie can't resist them. And yes, there's a terrific wine list as well. It's small, but well-chosen, with every wine served by the glass, the "quartino" and the bottle. The tasting notes on the menu are extensive; there are even phonetic pronunciations.

In this "Laboratory of Flavors," knowledge makes everything taste better.

Merrill Shindler talks about restaurants from 5 to 7 p.m. Saturday and Sunday on KLSX-FM 97.1

Coccole

Address: 320 S. Catalina Ave., Redondo Beach

Phone: 310-374-6929.

Cuisine: Italian

Hours: Dinner only, Tue.-Sun.

Details: Beer and wine. Street parking. Reservations essential.

Prices: Appetizers, \$3.95-\$9.95. Entrees, \$7.45-\$21.95.

Cards: MC, V