

## **Restaurant review: Coccole**

**By: Richard Foss**

The word “slow” is rarely a compliment; it’s too close to “sloth,” which implies laziness, carelessness, and climbing through trees very slowly using three toes. Still, in the culinary world there are times to celebrate all that is good about slowness: the measured pace of an artist’s work, the unhurried aging of fine wines or cheese, the languorous luxury of a meal in which every bite is savored.

When I saw the note on the menu at Coccole in Redondo Beach that proudly identified the place as a Slow Food restaurant, I took it as a very good sign. This movement started in Italy and enshrines some very Italian values, such as sustainable agriculture, conservation of traditional knowledge, and celebration of regional differences and practices in cooking. Sure enough, there were items I very rarely see in Italian restaurants anywhere in America, let alone in towns like Redondo that have almost no Italian community. After a few minutes of conversation with our server, a genial fellow named Kevin, we ordered some of the more daring items and sat back to see what happened. We had ordered three starters and a salad, and Kevin suggested that the best pacing and wine combination would be to have them served in pairs. We therefore started with Fiori di Zucca – zucchini flowers stuffed with mozzarella and anchovies, then pan-fried – and a plate of cold sliced roast beef topped with tuna sauce, capers, and olive oil. I was frankly amazed to see the beef with tuna sauce as a regular menu item, since most Americans never think of combining meat and fish in this manner. Nevertheless, this classic summer dish fits Californian tastes – it’s tangy with the slight sharpness of fish, lemon, and capers, but robust in flavor. Every time I have this dish, I’m amazed by how well the fish and beef accent each other – it’s a must-try if you want a real taste of Southern Italy.

The zucchini flowers were complimentary in that they also included a taste of seafood, the dash of anchovy in each stuffed blossom. Zucchini flowers are only available for a short time each year, and when they’re available they should be cherished. The flowers were still attached to baby zucchini, and I found that the perfect match of flavors involved a piece of blossom with a small chunk of vegetable, both because the flavors were best together and because the texture was most interesting that way.

We accompanied those starters with the first of several wine pairings from the very interesting list of Italian wines. Well, not exactly from the list – apparently the selection at Coccole is much wider than the menu would indicate, and once we told Kevin to surprise us with good pairings, he came up with several items we had never heard of. The wines – an excellent Arneis and a Nebbiolo – are available by the “quartino,” a measure that gives three people each half a glass. It’s a perfect amount for three or four people who want to drink moderately but experience a variety of flavors, and Kevin kept the pleasant surprises coming throughout our meal.

Our second course was a salad of grilled Romaine lettuce with Parmesan, roasted tomatoes, basil, and a whipped balsamic dressing, and a daily special of several layers of roasted potatoes and Fontina cheese wrapped in pancetta. The quality of ingredients and the very light, delicately sweet dressing made the salad work, though I preferred the

spinach salad with pear, walnuts, and gorgonzola that I'd enjoyed on a previous visit. The potatoes were interesting but a bit too salty for my taste, though we noticed that a sip of the *Vino Nobile di Montepulciano* that Kevin recommended balanced the flavors very well.

For main courses we selected *Cinghiale Calabrese* – wild boar roasted in parsley-garlic oil, pan-seared duck breast, and a stew of pork with vegetables, herbs, and three kinds of berries. Wild boar has a taste and texture that are different from regular pork, slightly more coarse and full-flavored, and I've had it in various preparations in Hawaii, Europe, and occasionally in the US. The version at *Coccole* was a slight disappointment – it was delicious, but the preparation here obscured some of the unique nature of the meat. It was sliced very thin so that the distinctive texture was masked, and though the parsley-garlic oil was very good with roasted meat, I'd have preferred it cooked in a more natural style. It was very good, but might have been made with *Kurobuta* or another high-quality pork and achieved a similar effect. I had no such reservations about the other two entrees. The duck was cooked a perfect medium-rare and was served with broccoli that had been wrapped with prosciutto and fried in cheesy breadcrumbs. The rustic heart of Italian cooking was right here, a Northern Italian peasant's dinner made elegant with perfect execution and top-quality ingredients. The pork was more complex – it had been first roasted to concentrate the flavors, then simmered with herbs, onion, cranberries, blueberries, and raspberries. Yes, cranberries aren't native to Italy, but *Coccole* is true to Italian flavors, not slavishly following recipes but losing their soul. And this dish does have soul and incredible depth of flavor, the berries and spice combining astonishingly well with the meat. The only style of cooking I know that approaches this effect is the North African tagine, which also involves fruit and meat cooked together, and it's tempting to look at the proximity of Italy to Tunisia and wonder if the recipe made the hop a few centuries ago. Wherever it came from, it's a work of genius, and *Coccole's* chef Collette Pankopf makes it work brilliantly here.

I invited my companions to pick what they wanted from the dessert menu, as everything looked too sweet for my tastes. They picked vanilla ice cream sandwiched with meringue and topped with chocolate and a plate of sponge cake layered with nougat and pastry cream. I expected to have no more than a bite of each, just to find out what they were like. Marvelously, they were far better than I expected, the meringue light and crisp but not over-sweet, and the nougat nutty and flavorful rather than the sugary caramel-flavored stuff that is usually served.

We scoured the two plates while sipping small glasses of dessert wine, filled to blissful contentment after a meal that lasted almost three hours. The bill for dinner for three people with tastes of several fine wines was \$170.00 – downright reasonable for an evening of this quality. This was slow food at its best, the luxury of a meal artfully served and savored at leisure. It's an incredibly civilized experience, and nobody in the South Bay does it like *Coccole*, a new restaurant that follows some very old traditions.

**Coccole** is located at 320 South Catalina Avenue in Redondo Beach, just south of Torrance Boulevard. Open for dinner only, daily except Monday. Wheelchair access good but curbs high in places, street parking only. Call 310-374-6929 for reservations.