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Reader

We Tore Lobster with Our Hands

"I need a break." That was my dear wife Grace, midway through our kitchen remodel. A carpenter friend from Wisconsin had come west for a wedding and agreed to stay on and help demolish (and hopefully rebuild) our kitchen/dining room. The Monday after the wedding, we descended into our self-inflicted nightmare. The cabinets disgorged astonishing quantities of stuff — "Have we ever used this silver chafing dish?" — the pantry got spread out around the living room, and the kitchen proper moved to the top of the Ping-Pong table. For two weeks, Grace had been feeding us, our kids, and our hungry carpenter from an electric frying pan, a hot plate, a toaster oven, and a microwave. Now it was Saturday night, and it was time to go out. Somewhere nearby, somewhere homey, someplace good enough to make us forget the evisceration of our home.

We hit upon Antica Trattoria, an Italian restaurant tucked into a strip mall built in the days when people believed in strip malls. The ceiling was high, the exposed beams were wooden, and the warm yellow space was expansive enough to showcase the murals painted on the walls, as well as some copper kitchen implements and a few baby pictures. We were glad for the ceilings; the vaulted space helped swallow up some of the roar of happy talk that poured from the packed tables. We saw big plates of food making their way to folks who looked to be serious, even deeply committed eaters. Happy anticipation began to rouse our weary selves.

"What translates to spaghetti and meatballs?" asked a man at the next table over as he gazed at the Italian-named (but English-described) selections on the menu. We chuckled and then turned to our own decisions. Spaghetti was nowhere to be found, but there was still plenty of pasta, along with other dishes hailing from all over Italy. We saw items labeled "Fiorentina," "Romana," "Piemontese," and "Toscana," and more.

It can be tempting, when reading restaurant menus, to poke fun at the proliferation of adjectives designed to impress: "oven-roasted," "hand-plucked," even "truffled." But however extraneous some adjectives may be, there is at least one association I think always worth mentioning: that of "homemade" and "pasta." At



PHOTOGRAPH BY JOE KILM

Antica, it appeared three times: with the ravioli, the fettuccine, and the gnocchi. (I know gnocchi are dumplings, but it's still worth mentioning.) We were eager to try all three, opting for a special of broad, razor-thin pappardelle as a variation on the fettuccine.

But first, the antipasti, and before that, the bread — house-baked and very light, with whispers of rosemary inside and a flurry of flour clinging to the crust. The accompanying olive oil was similarly light; we dipped and nibbled until the arrival of our trio of appetizers, starting with the fine *carpaccio esotico*. The delicatesslices of beef fillet formed a deep-red magic carpet that alighted on our tongues and displayed an array of treasures: fat capers, pale hearts of palm, dainty wedges of lemon, and sturdy triangles of Parmesan cheese, all surrounded by a gleam of truffle oil. The oil amplified the Parmesan's faint nuttiness and swathed everything in "almost-too-much richness. Balance came from

the fine acidity of the lemon, the tangy pucker of the capers, and the watery, rooty texture of the hearts of palm.

After that somewhat exotic opening — we don't eat a lot of raw beef shavings at home — we eased into the *polenta con salsiccia*. (Not that Grace makes a lot of grilled polenta at home either — all that stirring, inserting the wood to soak out excess moisture — but she could.) The dish started its work before it even landed on the table, thanks to a big sprig of fragrant rosemary laid atop the thin square of polenta at the center of things. Under the initial blast of rosemary came a wave of mushroomy aromas, made sweet by the Madeira in the burnished-brown sauce. We spotted crimini, oyster, and shiitake amid the surrounding mounds of crumbled sausage (from Pete's Quality Meats in Little Italy). Mixed greens lay under everything, sopping up liquid and wilting from the heat, while across the top, a bright ridge of gorgonzola was just beginning

Antica Trattoria
 ★★ (very good)

5654 Lake Murray Boulevard (at Baltimore Drive), La Mesa, Lake Murray Village; 619-463-9919; www.anticatrattoria.com

HOURS: Lunch, Tuesday–Friday, 11:30 a.m.–2:30 p.m.; dinner, Monday–Sunday, 4:30 p.m.–10:00 p.m.

PRICES: Moderate. Appetizers, \$5.95–\$11.95; pasta, \$11.95–\$16.95; entrées, \$12.95–\$20.95.

CUISINE & BEVERAGES: Far-flung Italian, with dishes hailing from all over. Some interesting Italian wines on the list; ask your server for suggestions.

NEED TO KNOW: Menu changes a bit twice a year. Some lighter dishes for summer; heartier fare for winter. Homemade pastas are generally excellent.

Ratings reflect the reviewer's reaction to food, ambiance, and service with price taken into consideration. Menu listings and prices are subject to change.

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REVIEW
 AMBROSE MARTIN

to soften. We dug in.

The polenta was perfect, something like the best piece of toast you ever put stuff on and ate with a knife and fork. The flavor was not huge, but the texture was a dream: warm and grainy on the inside, with a crust that held its distinct chewy-crisp character even after soaking in sauce. Combined with the sausage, mushrooms, cheese, and greens, it made every bite a joy. It also made our third appetizer — the *portobello ripieno*, a lobster-sauced mushroom stuffed with crabmeat, Parmesan cheese, and bread crumbs (and spinach, we discovered) — pale by comparison. The mushroom was firm, the crab was discernible, but the Parmesan and spinach came on strong and left things feeling ordinary.

That feeling disappeared with the arrival of our entrées. The pappardelle special featured a spicy tomato sauce and a Pacific lobster — a rich man's shrimp *fra diavolo*. The pepper in the sauce glowed in our mouths like dying coals, softening us up to swoon over the double-wide fettuccine. How something could be so tender while still remaining firmly al dente was a mystery to me, though when I asked the chef about it, he replied, "There's no secret. It's a pain. Sometimes, I say, 'Why do I do this?' The next second, I say, 'I love this job, because it's the only thing I know. I love it.'" The lobster was another mystery — we didn't receive any implements of dissection — but we reached in and tore it apart by hand.

The *ravioli montecarlo* boasted similar tenderness and delicacy, which may be why we ended up picking on it. Perhaps we were looking for the pea under all those mattresses, the imperfection that only gets noticed amid overall excellence. Lovely discs of pasta stuffed with lovely, dense ricotta cheese and drizzled with a very mild tomato-cream

sauce made lovely by fresh basil and chunks of zippy, cooked tomato. Our trouble resided at the seam, where the pasta was crimped together to make a cheesy pillow. The resultant double-thick rim, nearly half an inch wide, struck us as doughy.

Two bites into my *gnocchi al Porcini*, I realized I probably should have ordered the *gnocchi Caprese*, which gussied up its potato dumplings with tomatoes, basil, buffalo-milk mozzarella, and tomato cream sauce. The *gnocchi* themselves were splendid; it was a pleasure to sink my teeth through their even puffiness. But the echoes of Madeira and mushroom from the polenta starter were too much for me. Here, the Madeira-tinted sauce brought in an element of cream, and the porcini mushrooms were both richer and sharper than their predecessors, but still, my palate began to feel weary. *Mea culpa* — no fault of the kitchen.

We closed with two of the housemade desserts: tiramisu and crème brûlée. An overabundance of cocoa powder marred the tiramisu, which was otherwise coffee-rich and

custardy and served parfait-style in a cactus-motif margarita glass. And the crème brûlée was, to paraphrase Monty Python's cheese-shop sketch, "a bit runner than I like it." But we were too comforted to mind and concentrated instead on the outstanding coffee.

Two weeks later, all that remained of our kitchen makeover were the hundred-odd finishing touches that accompany the end of any project. We decided to hit Antica again, this time in celebration. We ordered a bottle of 1996 Gattinara — decent age, decent price, interesting wine. Then we skipped the antipasti and started off with a couple of starches before moving on to the protein-rich *secondi* we had saved for our second visit. Grace's *risotto bosco mare* — cooked in a saffron stock and laced with smoked salmon, shrimp, and asparagus — was tip-top. The risotto hovered the firm side of the spectrum but did not lack for yummy-sticky moistness. And the salmon's flavor, boosted by smoking, stood up to the measured force of the saffron.

The *penne alla montanara* lacked such proportion. Pasta,

mushrooms, goat cheese, and bits of filet mignon and veal all suffered beneath a Madeira-tomato sauce of overpowering sweetness. It seemed an odd misstep, given the balance that had prevailed elsewhere, but saucy interference struck again on the *pollo all'aretina*. There, a beautifully golden-crust stuffed chicken breast drowned in the salty sea of a Chardonnay-and-sun-dried-tomato-cream sauce. When my almond-crusted *sea bass alle mandorle* arrived mushy and flavor-light, I was ready to go back to the *gnocchi*. But we pressed on with the meat and were rewarded. *Involitini imperiale*, thin rounds of veal wrapped around lengths of asparagus and red pepper, brought in shrimp for a play on surf-and-turf, to happy effect. And the *maiale alla Piemontese* gave a glimpse of the sort of dish we hoped to one day produce in our own reassembled kitchen: oven-roasted pork loin, crusted with pepper and herbs, and served with caramelized apples. The Barolo wine reduction clung to the meat in juicy globules, like gravy. "The flavors have been given time to get to know each other," said our

carpenter as he speared a bite of crisp-crust pork and just-sweet apple. "It's comforting but it's not dull."

ABOUT THE CHEF
 Francesco Basile started life in Sicily, "in a little fishing village near Palermo." He attended the state culinary school in Palermo and learned a lesson or two from his dders besides. "I learned that when you boil the potato for *gnocchi*, the potato won't take on too much water if you don't touch it too much. And the faster you do the *gnocchi*, the less flour you have to put in. You've got to be really fast; that's the lightness of the *gnocchi*." After culinary school, he began working as a journeyman chef. "In the summertime, I was at a beach place; in the wintertime, in the mountains."

Why did he come here? "It's a good question. In the beginning, I came to try California, and I ended up liking it. I created my family here, and after 13 years, it's practically my new home. Seven years ago, I got a beautiful little daughter. I own my little dream here." He started out in

Orange County, then spent two and a half years as an executive chef at Osteria Panevino in the Gaslamp's Italian row. "After two and a half years, I needed stimulation. That's why I left. It was a gorgeous place to work, but that's the craziness of being a chef. You're always looking for new experiences, new stimulation." He headed back to Orange County for a year, then started searching San Diego for a place of his own.

Basile suspected that he could develop a loyal customer base in East County — "La Mesa, San Carlos, and especially Mount Helix." But the strip mall in which he settled was no Gaslamp; the only other restaurants were a bagel shop and an Outback Steakhouse. "My partner and I came here on a Thursday night before we bought the place. It was dark. We looked each other in the face and asked, 'Are you sure you want to do this?'" They did it, and their gamble paid off. Now, three years later, "We know practically all of our customers by name. They appreciate it. We make a good living, thank God. We don't complain." ■