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RESTAURANT REVIEW

Playing a different tune

At Piccolo, the tiny Italian spot in Venice, a new chef, Alberto Lazzarino, offers something more than standard fare.

By S. Irene Virbila, Times Staff Writer

It's an Indian summer night on the Venice boardwalk and a typically Fellini-esque scene with poncho-wearing retro hippies beating out tunes on battered guitars while skaters speed among joggers, bikers and beach lovers walking their pooches.

ADVERTISEMENT The crescent moon hangs above the palm trees ruffled by the salty breeze. And at 5 Dudley Ave., a block from the beach, bohemian bons vivants are sipping wine at tables in front of Piccolo Ristorante Italiano.

The 2 1/2-year-old restaurant, one of the most reliable on the Santa Monica-Venice beachfront, used to be called Piccolo Cipriani until the Cipriani family of Harry's Bar fame put a stop to that. Now it's just Piccolo.

But there's been more than a name change. Now that founders Stefano de Lorenzo and Antonio Muré have opened La Botte, their wine-focused Italian restaurant in Santa Monica, a new team is in place at Piccolo and the tiny Venice restaurant has a subtly different spirit.

At first glance, the menu looks much the same — duck prosciutto, beef carpaccio, quail in Marsala sauce — but the dishes all seem just a bit lighter than I remember. The pasta dishes are still as original, and the new chef has added to their number with nightly specials.

On a weeknight, friends and I arrive just after 8. Because Piccolo doesn't take reservations, there's no need to rush to make a fixed time. On the other hand, I've never arrived when there wasn't at least a short wait; on weekends, I imagine it's much longer. On this night, the tables out front are taken, and Vittorio Viotti, the affable new co-owner, hurries over. "Let me see if I can borrow a table," he tells us, and heads down the block to the cafe on the corner.

Evidently the answer is no, because he's back with a chair, no table. Two more chairs materialize, and then a fourth. So there we are, sitting on chairs, watching the scene, and it feels, improbably, very like Italy.

An elegant, offbeat crowd

When the group ahead of us moves inside, we graduate to an outside table. Through the windows, I can see the dining room, which has a much more glamorous crowd than I remember when Piccolo opened, a mix of young Hollywood and Venice boho royalty. The women are beautiful in an elegant, offbeat way. The men look unconventional and worldly — artists, architects, filmmakers, who knows?

We watch as chef Alberto Lazzarino, his long hair wrapped in a colorful bandanna, delivers a plate of tagliarini to a table and proceeds to shave a blizzard of truffles over the top. They're winter truffles, Viotti tells us. How winter? It's still fall.

Viotti goes inside to the kitchen to clear up the confusion, and Lazzarino comes out to explain. They're actually summer truffles, the much less expensive ones with only a faint perfume, but a



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pleasant texture and flavor, more garnish than main event. Prices for white Alba truffles are so crazy this year, says Lazzarino, who is from Piedmont, that they can't bring themselves to buy any. At least that's an honest answer.

It's beginning to get chilly outside, and just when I'm wishing I'd brought a shawl, a table becomes available inside. The chef's table, Viotti calls it, but it's really just the closest to the kitchen. The kitchen's no bigger than a home kitchen, really, and with Lazzarino, two cooks and several other people back there, it's a tight fit. We're so close, we can hear the sauté pans sizzle.

Lazzarino, last seen manning the pizza ovens at Cheebo in Hollywood, is no newcomer to L.A. He looks so young it's hard to believe he's been here for 14 years, brought over by the late Mauro Vincenti to join the kitchen team at Rex downtown in its heyday. Lazzarino has been here long enough to understand what dishes pique Angelenos' interest, but he's also smart enough to offer just a little more than the standard L.A. Italian.

Judging by its modest setting, basically a storefront decorated with some Venetian masks and vintage black-and-white photos of the watery city, Piccolo should by rights be more trattoria than *ristorante*. The menu, though, tries to play it both ways, with some delicious simple dishes and others with more pretensions that are sometimes successful, sometimes not.

Raw artichoke salad is heaped fashionably high, crowned with shavings of Parmesan and decorated, bizarrely, with segments of pink grapefruit. The artichoke is delicious, though, slivered and bright with lemon juice. A refreshing watercress salad is tossed with sliced hearts of palm and pine nuts, and shaved Parmesan.

And the lovely carpaccio of rainbow beets — red, gold, pink — laid out on the plate with a slice of creamy goat cheese on top makes a fine first course.

For pure comfort food, turn to soup. On this night, it's a loose lentil one dotted with root vegetables, like something an Italian grandmother would cook. Another evening, as a special, Lazzarino uses the same lentils to sauce tagliatelle to make a beguiling, earthy pasta dish.

The best choices at Piccolo are often the nightly specials. One time, it's plump, handmade *ravioli del Plin*, a stuffed pasta from the chef's own Piedmont, napped in butter and festively showered with those pale, black-edged summer truffles.

Stuffed with a mixture of meat, greens and Parmesan, they're wonderful with or without the truffles. Why isn't this permanently on the menu?

From the regular menu, a few pastas are worth noting. The first is *cassunziei all'Ampezzana*, pasta stuffed with red beets and sauced with butter, Parmigiano and poppy seeds. The dish comes from the fashionable ski resort of Cortina d'Ampezzo in northern Italy.

I've always loved this unusual pasta, but this time the *cassunziei* are swimming in far too much melted butter and grated Parmesan. More is not always better.

Tortelli filled with a mixture of potatoes and figs is another favorite. Simple and direct, the pasta is served in a drizzle of butter perfumed with sage and Parmesan. And I like the *spaghetti alla Trapanese* made with square-cut *spaghetti alla chitarra*, fresh tomatoes, almond pesto and basil.

But what's with the risotto? Right now it's a butternut squash version, more like squash porridge with some rice in it that tastes as if it were made at least the day before. It's one of the worst risotto dishes I've ever been served in L.A.

#### The slow roast

Fortunately, the next course is the luscious, slow-roasted pork shoulder that cooks in a slow oven for 12 hours. Served with more of those hearty lentils in a Marsala and rosemary sauce, it makes waiting for a table at Piccolo entirely worthwhile. It's not fancy, but it's real cooking.

Culotte steak, sliced and fanned out like a deck of cards on the plate, is always a good bet too. The *tagliata* ("sliced"), as this presentation of the steak is called in Italian, is topped with fresh arugula and Parmigiano shavings, as light a steak dish as you're going to get anywhere. Ask for the sauce, Worcestershire spiked with garlic, to be served on the side. It's strong, and not to everyone's taste.

Baby veal chop lives up to expectations: It's tender and flavorful, though a bit overwhelmed by an over-reduced Barolo wine sauce.

Low-key and not easy to find, Piccolo offers something closer to true regional Italian cooking than many of the more famous — and higher profile — *ristorantes* on Brentwood's Italian restaurant row. I think its hidden location and self-selected clientele has a lot to do with it: The kitchen doesn't have to cook to someone's preconceived notion of Italian cooking. Piccolo goes its own way.

The wine list is mostly Italian with choices from moderate to very expensive from all the important regions. You can drink a Vernaccia from Tuscany for \$28 or a Greco di Tufo from Campania for \$36, but also a Vintage Tunina from Jermann in Friuli for \$119, a high markup for that wine.

In Tuscan reds, only a Morellino di Scanzano and a Chianti Colli Fiorentini are under \$40. And from Sicily, there's just one red under \$40 too. A bottle is a better value than wines by the glass.

A large party in the front of the room gets up to go; kisses all round and some for the chef. The restaurant begins to empty — just our group and one other remain. Time to order dessert. The most popular is *crema di vaniglia* glazed with caramel, basically a vanilla pudding, and big enough to share.

Tiramisu is the real sleeper. Dense and delicious, not too sweet, it's closer to what you get in the Veneto than almost any version in town. If you fancy something rich and cold, however, go with the amaretto *semifreddo*, which tastes something like a fluffy frozen nougat. With four spoons attacking it, ours disappears before it even has a chance to think about melting.

By the time we leave, there's a full-blown hootenanny going on at the corner cafe. *Buona notte*, we say as we push open the door. On the boardwalk, skaters and joggers are still whizzing by. *Buona notte*.

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### Piccolo Ristorante Italiano

**Rating:** ★★

**Location:** 5 Dudley Ave., Venice; (310) 314-3222; [www.picolovenice.com](http://www.picolovenice.com).

**Ambience:** Tiny boho Italian a block from the beach with a glamorous Venice clientele. No reservations, so there's almost always a wait for a table.

**Service:** Unflappable and charming.

**Price:** Appetizers, \$12.50 to \$16; pastas, \$15 to \$20; main dishes, \$23.50 to \$36; desserts, \$8.

**Best dishes:** Grilled calamari with Swiss chard, watercress salad, rainbow beet carpaccio with goat cheese, *pappardelle* in wild boar ragout, *spaghetti alla Trapanese*, sliced culotte steak, slow-roasted pork shoulder, amaretto *semifreddo*.

**Wine list:** Decent, mostly Italian list, includes some half bottles and some expensive heavy hitters. Corkage, \$20.

**Best table:** The one in the west front corner.

**Special features:** No reservations.

**Details:** Open Monday through Thursday from 5:30 to 10 p.m., Friday and Saturday from 5 to 11 p.m., and Sunday from 5 to 10 p.m. Wine and beer. Street and lot parking.

Rating is based on food, service and ambience, with price taken into account in relation to quality.

★★★★★ Outstanding.

★★★★ Excellent.

★★★ Very good.

★ Good.

No star: Poor to satisfactory.

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