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## Review: Osteria La Buca

 By Brad A. Johnson | Photography by Edward Duarte | *Angeleno magazine* | February 1, 2010


Clockwise from top-left: Chef **Alberto Lazzarino** has filled Mama's shoes at Osteria La Buca; the charred romaine salad with maplewood-smoked bacon; the Zona Sul pizza with prosciutto and arugula.

***Cutting the Apron Strings: After a bittersweet shakeup in the kitchen, Osteria La Buca is the best it's ever been***

The nighttime traffic screeches to a standstill at the seamy intersection of Melrose and Wilton. Some idiot in a black, late-model Mercedes has just performed an illegal U-turn and skidded into the alley next to **Osteria La Buca**. But rather than actually pulling into the alley, the car stops halfway onto the sidewalk, leaving the back half of the sedan hanging into oncoming traffic. When all four doors immediately swing open, it looks, at first, as if the car's occupants are running from the cops. But then a gaggle of big-haired women—I imagine the mothers of the entire cast of *Jersey Shore*—lumber out, laughing. They are all oblivious to the traffic quagmire and curbside spectacle they've just created.

Horns are honking. A dog is barking behind the fence of a nearby duplex. The light on Melrose is green, yet traffic can't budge. An exasperated valet rushes to the Mercedes to remove it from the street as the women file into the restaurant and are shown straight to an upstairs table. Meanwhile, my party and I are standing on the sidewalk, waiting for our table to open up.

"Sorry. Reservations are running 10 to 15 minutes behind tonight."

An older couple emerges from the restaurant, rubbing their bellies and smiling. "Where's the valet?" the man wonders. "Maybe we should just go for a walk," says the woman. "Oh, wasn't that the best salad you've ever eaten?" "Yes. Can you believe it? Grilled lettuce. I didn't know that was possible."

A couple of hours later, the valet will still be swamped, and I'll be the one on the sidewalk rubbing my belly and raving about the charred romaine while someone else is waiting in line to get in. The Romano is indeed an awesome salad. Against the searing flame of a grill, sturdy romaine lettuce transforms into a smoky, musky delicacy whose wilted outer leaves are made even more seductive by the chunks of maplewood-smoked bacon and shavings of sharp Parmesan cheese sprinkled on top. I'm already plotting my return so I can enjoy it again.

Osteria La Buca is not new or even newly popular. It's been around forever, just like its storefront neighbors—a shady convenience/liquor store and a Oaxacan joint that's far too grungy to be so brightly lit. The first time I ate here, seven or eight years ago, this place was a dump, too. No bigger than a shoebox, it was called simply La Buca. It served decent pizzas, but the rest of the food was crap. I remember chewing on a piece of lamb that was tougher than leather, wondering why my successful movie-industry friends had dragged me here.

Then, a couple of years ago, the owner apparently had saved up enough money from serving a steady stream of executives from Paramount Studios (just two blocks away) to hire designer **Kristopher Keith** to re-envision the place. A second-floor dining room and a large fireplace were added (as was the word "osteria"), and the roof was cut open to let the moonlight shine in.

Hipsters descended upon it like actors at an open audition, and they all fell in love with the then-manager's dotting, charismatic mother (known to everyone as **Mama**), who pitched in daily to help make fresh pasta from scratch, which would become one of the restaurant's hallmarks.

While the noodles were technically authentic, the pizzas were still the better reason to come.

A few months ago, however, something happened that upset a lot of regulars and staff alike. Mama and her son parted ways with owner **Graham Snyder**. And while everybody loved Mama, she was always more of a consulting chef and mother figure. The restaurant had grown too big, too popular. She was in over her head.

A new chef, **Alberto Lazzarino**, makes the pastas now. If the name sounds familiar, it's because the Piemonte native has been working in L.A.'s Italian dining scene since the days of the long ago shuttered Rex II Ristorante, downtown. Through the years, he's since headed the kitchens of Alto Palato, Il Moro, Piccolo Ristorante and most recently his very own place, Melograno, a very elegant endeavor that never managed to rise above its unsavory Hollywood Boulevard locale the way La Buca has surprisingly done on this forgotten stretch of Melrose.

I'm sitting at the bar one night eating a bowl of bucatini, and I'm thinking that this is almost the best bowl of pasta in town at the moment. Bucatini look like spaghetti, but they're slightly thicker and have a microscopic hole running through their centers, like flexible tubing. From bite to bite, the flavor swings from sweet to spicy to savory, from the vinegary kick of Italian peppers to the sweet-tart deluge of melted cherry tomatoes or the lard-laden silkiness of guanciale (cured pork jowl).

I've just about licked my bowl clean when a woman dressed in a miniskirt, chunky heels and black stockings climbs onto the stool next to mine and begins aggressively quizzing the bartender.

"Is the pasta any good?" the woman asks, running a finger down the menu.

"It's very good," says the bartender, **Snyder**, who introduces himself.

I look at my bowl. It's empty. I lean toward her. "Get the bucatini," I say. "And the Margherita pizza."

There's not a lot of innovation going on here, yet strangely I don't mind.

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