

Food for Thought

A Taste of Atlanta's Rising Restaurant Scene



PHOTO COURTESY OF RAJISHEL JUHAN

Zuppa di Pesci

Toni's Casa Napoli
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Falling in Love with Toni's Casa Napoli

There's a certain serendipity when traveling that seems to make food taste better. The conventional story goes like this: On a trip to parts unknown, you cautiously enter a dive, meet a local, and are introduced to a dish that makes you a true insider. It's the boy-meets-girl story of the food world that makes a good retelling (as well as excellent Anthony Bourdain TV episodes).

Then there's the other kind of fortune, where you stumble upon an old favorite and look at it with new eyes. Love blossoms. (This could be called the girl-next-door story, a true American classic.) And here is where we find Toni's Casa Napoli. It's an Italian restaurant, family-owned, and it's been an old standard for about 25 years. It sits in an unlikely spot: a boxy strip mall on Mount Vernon Road in Dunwoody, where the surrounding shops (video store, health food store) seem to set you up for just

another mom-and-pop with vinyl checked tablecloths and Chianti-bottle candleholders. So it's something of a shock to enter and be transported to a much sharper, citified and seductive place that is as conducive to romance as it is to the joshing of the father and teenage sons at the next table.

The restaurant has recently been refurbished, with dark, comfortable upholstery, white tablecloths, and soft lighting. There are a few tables up front near the gleaming bar, but I preferred to sit in the back, surrounded by oil paintings and with a great view of the wine cellar, stocked with a growing complement of Italian wines. The menu has also been nudged a little, with tweaks made to the old menu to update it for newer times. The generations-old family recipes are still there, with a few changes. For example, what used to be a smaller two-chop Veal Saltimbocca is now a single large, sexy chop that is almost as long as my forearm. (With portions this abundant, you really need to bring a date or plan for some fantastic late-night snacks.)

The bigger and better changes are partly the work of Santiago Gomez, nephew of the current owner, who left a medical residency (and Miami) to follow his love of food and family back to Atlanta. His affection for his aunt's cooking shows, in the updated menu as well as in what he's left alone: the lightly fried calamari with a zesty tomato sauce, the enormous platter of *Zuppa di Pesci* with lobster, and more. The menu serves up favorites like fettucini *carbonara* and eggplant *parmigiana*, but everything is made with care. Even the salads are freshly torn and mixed, with no slapdash in sight.

The family's Colombian-Italian heritage comes to the forefront in the desserts, which are simultaneously lighter and richer than the typical last-course sugar-fest. The tiramisu, served in a wine glass, is light as a feather, relying on espresso and a deft touch instead of stodgy cream-cheesiness to carry flavor. But the true

delight of the night is the *tres leches* cake: dense, dripping with cream, and with a nutty, caramel flavor that is almost tropical. It's a surprise ending to our trip, summing up what might be the best story of all: local boy makes good.

—Reviewed by Melissa Bradley Diskin



Cuerno's Spanish Flair

Riccardo Ullio has nothing to prove in Atlanta. His Italian cuisine restaurants Fritti and Sotto Sotto are highly regarded, and his new Brazilian concept Beleza isn't doing too badly either. So when it was announced he would open a new Spanish cuisine restaurant, most people expected the best. And once again, Ullio has delivered.



Crema Catalana – Cardamom crème brûlée with café con leche spuma

Fabada Asturiana – Chorizo morcilla, chistorra and “judeon gigante” beans



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CUERNO

Located on the corner of Juniper and 8th streets in Midtown, right next door to Beleza, Cuerno is a cozy, unassuming restaurant with a lofty menu. The interior is markedly Spanish, and therefore warm and inviting. Stacked slate walls and the wooden beamed ceiling set the tone, while mosaic tile accents and rich red draperies add spice. The large bulls sculpture, which is the focal point of the restaurant, along with the slightly less conspicuous but equally as significant portrait of the Virgin Mary, give the ambiance that final Spanish flair.

The menu is set up so that diners can enjoy it in a variety of ways. There are tapas, appetizers, entrées and *paellas*, which are served for two. *Paella*, often

Cuerno
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