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Coco Pazzo earns every accolade; Tuscan charm, fresh ingredients

By: Laura Bianchi September 06, 2010



An antipasto table holds a tempting display of roasted, marinated asparagus, red onions and bell peppers, plus an array of cured meats, cheeses and olives. Photo by: Erik Unger

Coco Pazzo is one terrific restaurant for business, and it has been for nearly 20 years.

Loaded with Tuscan charm, it serves a top-tier clientele at midday, including Merchandise Mart President Christopher Kennedy, interior designer Holly Hunt and honchos from real estate, law, politics and the arts. Riccardo Muti, the music director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and a native of Italy, is a regular, too.

So much draws us into this loft-like space, particularly the rough-hewn elegance of vintage brick and wood beams against blue velvet curtains, but also the cultured buzz, polished service and well-spaced, linen-draped tables seating 167.

Above all are the hearty foods and bold flavors of Tuscany. Chef partner Chris Macchia, 30, promoted from Coco Pazzo Café in late 2008, brings sophisticated flair, mixing traditional dishes with foodie updates, like fresh peaches and truffles on pizza.

He starts with ingredients so good, half the battle is won before his cooks turn them into soups, salads and entrees.

Before you scope out that wide-ranging menu, a beautiful antipasto table near the entry beckons, though, surprisingly, none of my servers pitched this indulgent array of salumi, cheese, grains and house-marinated or pickled vegetables.

I'm glad I took the initiative. The half-order (\$14) yielded many wonderful bites of salami, coppa, marinated olives, pickled onions, roasted Brussels sprouts and marinated asparagus, enough for three.

Menu starters are mostly classic soups and salads, with daily specials like silky summer soup (\$7) of sweet yellow peppers and basil, roughened up a bit with chewy farro, a whole grain with satisfying texture and nutty flavor.

Spinach salad (\$9) strikes a Mediterranean pose with figs and pungent gorgonzola softened by creamy mascarpone.

COCO PAZZO

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Throughout the menu Mr. Macchia scatters salumi and house-made sausages for full-bodied flavor that works exceptionally well in the wood-fired pizzas. Done Neapolitan style, these thin-crust pies are a knife-and-fork experience, crisp around the edges, soft in the middle.

In one, blissfully fatty coppa is paired with mushrooms, oven-dried tomatoes and mozzarella (\$15); peppery salami overlays dried tomatoes and mozzarella (\$16) in a daily pizza special.

Pastas are sustaining and available in appetizer portions. In one outstanding composition, fennel-flavored sausage is crumbled into rigatoni with lightly creamy tomato sauce (\$11, appetizer). Coco Pazzo regulars would storm the battlements if this long-standing staple were retired from the menu; I might, too, and again if they tinkered with the fusilli (\$10, appetizer portion). Steamed broccoli florets are tossed with the corkscrew pasta, along with pancetta cubes, toasted garlic and fiery chili flakes.

Be sure to ask about the daily risotto. Done properly, this decadent rice dish is pure pleasure, creamy and chewy, fortified with butter and parmesan; the pea-dotted version (\$11, appetizer) was just right.

Entrees cover the usual surf, turf and produce, with one notable deviation: rich wild boar sausages dripping savory juices into braised lentils (\$15).

Alas, what begins so well falters at dessert. Rhubarb-strawberry crisp (\$9) was achingly tart; "tavoletta" (\$10), a layered bar cookie, was a confusing jumble of flavors and textures.

That same complex approach meshes better in "dolce limone" (\$9). Layers of vibrant lemon curd, whipped cream, almond crumble, cherries and mascarpone sorbet revitalized our fatigued taste buds.

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