



Epiqueerean
BY JENNY NGUYEN

Put a Li'l Italian in You

If there's one cuisine that's more exploited and misunderstood, it is Italian. Many Americans picture two big balls of meat atop a heaping pile of spaghetti, smothered in Prego. Here are three places to reel you in to what real Italian can be...that, my dear, is *amore*.

Lucca

3449 N.E. 24th Ave., 503-287-7372

This new lesbian-owned establishment is dripping with class. Lucca's atmosphere is divine: Earth tones and low lighting draw attention to the wood-fire open hearth, which produces some mighty fine pies. The homemade paté, white bean, bacon and sausage with pecorino bruschetta are fine starters, as is the spicy frisee salad with crisp pancetta. Pair these with a deep pour of merlot/cab blend and you're well on your way to Tuscany. Dabble in pizza indulgence with truffle oil and homemade fennel sausage. The homemade pasta—like thick-cut tagliatelle with mushrooms, leeks and prosciutto—is to-die. Meanwhile, the meltingly tender Carlton Farms pork slow-roasted in milk and Chianti-braised short ribs take Lucca to a whole new level of *delizioso*.

a Cena

7742 S.E. 13th Ave., 503-206-3291,
www.acenapdx.com

Let's try to ignore the fact that a Cena (pronounced "ah chay-na") is filling the void of Assaggio or the fact that the owners have opened some nationally acclaimed restaurants. Let's also set aside the fact that chef Scott Champine worked at French Laundry and Olea. This could be one of Portland's most exquisite fine dining establishments. From absurdly attentive service to outrageously stunning plate presentations, this place nails it. The *asparagi al cartoccio*, prosciutto-wrapped asparagus served crisp with a soft-boiled egg and fontina-truffle fondue, is mind-numbingly delicious. The *molluschi cotti al vapore*, Sicilian-style clams with salami, is both simple and deeply flavorful. Although both the gnocchi with braised lamb and the risotto with spot prawns and chanterelles were ab-fab, the hands-down winner of all is the *branzino arrosto*, whole Mediterranean white fish packed in rock salt and roasted till buttery, moist and heavenly. Go now and do as the name says, "to dinner!"

Piazza Italia

1129 N.W. Johnson St., 503-478-0619

If there's one place to dine casually in the Pearl, let it be here. This deli/restaurant—which bombards diners with soccer paraphernalia, Italian soaps on the flat screens and blaring opera music—is reminiscent of a cafe you'd stumble into from a small cobblestone alleyway in Parma. The food is no less authentic. Mortadella, prosciutto, coppa and soppressata grace the antipasto platter, while dozens of varieties of pasta make up the girth of the menu. From salsiccia, green peas and heavy cream with rigatoni to linguine with prosciutto and egg, a simple and hearty feast awaits. Be sure to save space in your face for the homemade gelato, which rivals the city's best...*ciao bella!* 

Write to JENNY NGUYEN at epiqueerean@comcast.net.

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