



If you ask the chef-owner, Riccardo Michi, to name his favorite dishes at Riccardo Trattoria (2119 N. Clark St.; 773-549-0038), he answers without hesitation, "The fish stew viareggina, from my mother's recipe." He also grooves on the veal and ricotta meat loaf, cesarina's same source. In 1942 Michi's mamma founded Girarrostto, a traditional Tuscan ristorante in Milan, which won her recognition by Le Cordon Bleu. Her son has learned well: he's quite the master with spaghetti and Manila clams (pictured here; \$18), and we figure only Michi and his mother know the secret to Chicago's creamiest panna cotta.

Penny Pollack



Riccardo Trattoria had me in awe and held me in thrall. Better still, this is what Italian food is all about. After one bite of the "trofie pasta with pesto Genovese sauce" I was tempted to leap up, turn toward the kitchen and give the chef, Riccardo Michi, a loud "Bravo!"

Chef Michi is related to Bice Ristorante owner and founder Roberto Ruggeri. The chef started his career in Milan's prestigious Girarrostto Ristorante. In 1982, Michi moved to the United States and opened the famous Sonny Bono's restaurant in Los Angeles (and then went on to open a number of Bice restaurants around the world).

After sampling more than a few dishes at this smart and small trattoria (the space was the home at one time of another Italian restaurant called Via Emilia) I can say that Michi demonstrates exceptional culinary expertise.

I had always been of a mind that Greek restaurants had a lock on grilled octopus, treating it to the point of sublime tenderness. I knew this dish would be good just by looking at it and inhaling the aroma. The whole young octopus was splayed across a rubble of perfectly cooked cubes of potatoes, silky roasted red and yellow peppers, and peppery leaves of arugula. A gloss of extra-virgin olive oil rounded out this impeccable and delicious appetizer.

The basic menu is a marvel of classic Italian dishes. And if that selection isn't good enough, each evening there is a specials list of about a dozen dishes. One evening there was an elegant presentation of fried zucchini blossoms that had been stuffed with a medley of mozzarella and prosciutto.

From that sublime appetizer to something simpler yet no less enjoyable -- "black mussels Livornese." A deep bowl was heaped with mussels to the point where some of the shells were hanging over the side.

As the fork play went on, digging out the tender meat and shoving the empty shells aside, I found a pot of red gold at the bottom of the bowl. This elegant and thick "broth" of tomatoes and capers offered up what Italians call "la scarpetta," a method by which chunks of bread are used to scoop up sauce.

The pasta e fagioli was fabulous. This was not some warmed-over, mushy rendition of the fabled pasta and bean soup that is a specialty of the Veneto (where it is called pasta e fasioi); this was the real deal. The tomato-based broth had been thickened with a puree of beans, so it had some body. An ample amount of pasta and beans flowed through the thick broth, which had undertones of rich beef flavor.

Another pasta dish not to miss is the tortelloni, the larger and more enjoyable version of tortellini. More enjoyable because the size allows for more filling, and when the filling is a delicious combination of spinach and ricotta you want all you can get. Dressed to the nines with a simple butter/sage/Parmesan sauce and cooked to perfection, this plate of pasta was exactly as it might be served in Bologna, Italy, from whence the whole tortellini family hails.

Chef Michi approaches Italian food with a nod to simplicity and a bow toward classical. The grilled iron steak, ("tagliata") with rosemary sauce was a fine example. The word "tagliata" implies sliced, and the delicious sirloin arrived neatly sliced, with the juices of the steak forming a mirror of sauce that had a subtle yet identifiable hint of rosemary. Wonderful eating was brought to an even more enjoyable level by the wedges of roasted potatoes -- softly tender just below the crispy exterior -- served on the side.

They just know how to get it right here. Veal Milanese was all that it should be and more. Pounded to just the right thinness, the tender veal sported a light and crispy bread crumb coating that enhanced the goodness of the veal. Plated with a fluff of tender baby arugula in which were nestled sweet little pear tomatoes, this was one tasty dish

Desserts ran the gamut from tiramisu to ricotta cheesecake to panna cotta. Each night a dessert special is offered, and one night it just happened to be zuppa Inglese. This "English soup" was a delicate arrangement of layers of liqueur-laced sponge cake in which were sandwiched layers of chocolate (the consistency of Nutella). I enjoyed the wedding cake consistency of this dessert over the tiramisu, but was not overly thrilled with either.

For a more refreshing finish, try one of the sorbetti (four flavors in all) that are served in a natural shell (probably from Bindi of Milan). I liked the lemon, but loved the peach.

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TOP NOSH

Homeboy Riccardo Michi is not a housewife. A chef whose advanced age qualifies him for discounted movie tickets, he still goes to his namesake Riccardo Trattoria every day to put stocks on to simmer, roll pasta dough and season plump hunks of meat before their all-day stint in the oven. So why did he name his newest menu addition *massaia*, "housewife" in Italian? "The veal ravioli, we call this *massaia* because it is comfort, it is home-style cooking," Michi says in his thick Milanese accent. "When you eat this, it's not a restaurant anymore, you are in someone's home." A member of the family who founded the Bice restaurant empire, Michi can now be found in a tiny kitchen, where he fills ravioli with roasted veal and nutmeg-dusted Parmesan, eyes a bolognese of both beef and veal that's laced with garlic and sage, and completes the sauce that tops the pasta pockets with a bit of cream and fresh porcini. The finished dish (\$16) would make any *massaia* proud. 2119 N Clark St between Dickens and Webster Aves (773-549-0038).

Heather Shouse

ITALIAN STALLION

(New Review) After 20 years of cheffing for his family's Bice restaurants, Riccardo Michi breaks out on his own

By Heather Shouse Photograph by Martha Williams

I'm sure I'm going to take some heat for this, but I'm willing to risk it to make a statement I feel pretty strongly about: It's nearly impossible to find good Italian food in Chicago.

Before you rush off to your computer to type out some impassioned letter to the editor extolling the virtues of the spaghetti with meatballs at Bruna's, chicken Vesuvio at Tufano's or fried calamari at Sabatino's, I'm not talking about Italian-American "restaurant food." I'm looking for authentic regional Italian, the kind of food you'd find in an adorable little trattoria in Italy driven by the chef and the season. And now, I think I've found it.

Riccardo Trattoria opened only a couple of months ago, and already it's a neighborhood favorite, packed every night of the week with loud-talking, glass-clinking friends and a handful of fresh-off-the-boat Italians whom Olive Garden would pay big bucks to cast in one of its commercials. The thick accents of the seasoned waiters might tip you off that the place has ties to Milan, a hunch that's confirmed once you taste chef Riccardo Michi's food.

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Michi's family founded the Bice restaurant empire in Milan, and he served as chef of the first stateside location (which opened in New York in '87), and more recently at the Chicago outpost.

And with his namesake Lincoln Park restaurant, he's left the money maker behind to open "you guessed" it is an adorable little trattoria driven by the chef and the season.

Start with the specials: If Michi's still offering the bacon-topped roasted quail with crispy polenta cake, don't miss it. It's the first sign of many good things to come. Of the starters on the regular menu, the prosciutto with moist buffalo mozz, the grilled tomato cheese with roasted veggies and the "pizzaccia" are equally great. The pizzaccia is brilliant and indulgent: a round of foccacia topped with prosciutto, robiola cheese and arugula and finished with a drizzle of fragrant truffle oil.

From there, loosen your belt, make like the Italians and go for a secondo course before entrees. Choosing between the pastas is tough, but if you have room for two, get the orecchiette shells with crumbled wild-boar sausage, garlicky rapini and pecorino cheese, and any pasta that serves as a vehicle for Michi's incredibly delicious bolognese meat sauce.

Deciding between entrees is equally hard, but luckily it's tough to go wrong (so long as you skip the disappointing veal-ricotta meatloaf with blah porcini-cream sauce). Double-cut lamb chops get seared before a perfect slow-roasting, and are served with the same killer potato wedges you'll find with the juicy pounded beef tenderloin. Just be careful not to polish off the giant golden fries; you'll need room for a perfect ending of "Nonna's fruit pie" or the ricotta cheesecake. There's no tiramisu, but I'm sure by next week we'll have a stack of letters from readers telling you exactly where you can find some.