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BUSINESS LUNCH

Formento's offers a modern take on old school



JOANNE TRESTRAIL CRAIN'S DINING



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Though the buzz about Formento's started almost immediately after this B. Hospitality (Balena, the Bristol) spot opened in January, we didn't race over to try it. Like others who have been eating their way through the city for years, we stifled a yawn. A new Italian restaurant! On Randolph Street, no less. Stop the presses.

Happily, the addition of lunch service Feb. 15 provided an excuse to pop over, and it turns out

Formento's main dining floor evokes old-school supper clubs while projecting a modern sensibility. FRANCIS SON

Formento's early fans had it right—the place is a great addition to Restaurant Row. With its white-clothed tables, semi-formally clad wait staff, cushy leather banquettes and armchairs (it's surprising how many restaurants get seating wrong), the light-filled main floor is entirely welcoming. It can seat 150 but the bilevel space, divided into smaller areas, never feels cavernous.

Roomy booths hold six diners easily, just right for talking business over rigatoni alla vodka (\$16).

At first glance, chef and partner Tony Quartaro's menu might look like red-sauce business as usual, but execution is everything, and here it's top-notch. The first dish to hit our table was vitello tonnato (\$15), listed as an antipasto, and its elegance caught us off guard. Paper-thin veal was topped with firm spears of baby artichoke, capers and delicate radish slices enfolding mayo-ed albacore tuna, with little bursts of flavor everywhere.

It happened again with a salad of roasted heirloom beets (\$11); lightly oiled, they, too, were gorgeous, paired with shavings of raw golden beets for a nice texture and color bump. Segments of blood orange the same hue as the roasted beets, pistachios and Castelrosso cheese, a semi-hard cheese from Italy's Piedmont region, played their parts to the hilt.

You easily could assemble a meal from such things, especially if you start with the sharable prosciutto platter (\$16); its clove-scented pickled cabbage, tangy cheese crisps and apple condiment, lively with mustard seeds, are really special.

FORMENTO'S
 925 W. Randolph St.
 312-690-7295 | [Formentos.com](#)

Neighborhood: Near West Side
Cuisine: Italian
Entree price range, lunch: \$12 to \$29
Reservations: Accepted
Rating: ★★ ★

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Shrimp scampi and Nonna's meatballs

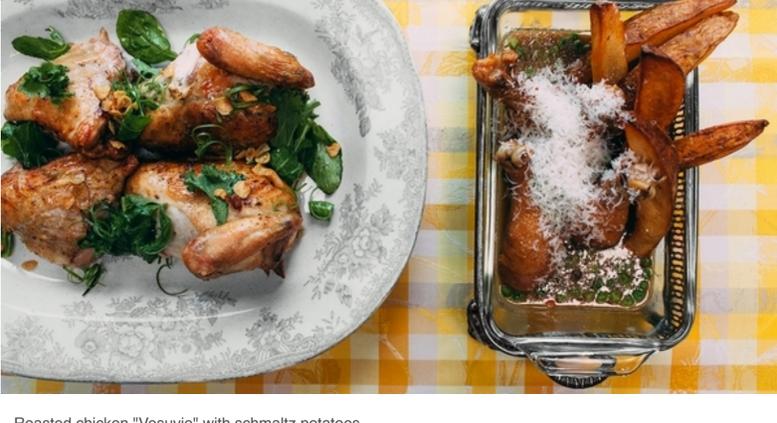
Entrees include shrimp scampi (\$25, above) that are luscious but in our case a tad overcooked, and the portion is unlikely to satisfy big eaters. Six ounces of hanger steak (\$21) is more filling, and a vinegary giardiniera gives it a kick. Pastas are house-made, except for the gluten-free varieties listed on a separate menu. Our

cavatelli with ricotta and Sicilian eggplant ragu (\$13), though a bit quiet, made us wish we could try all of them.

There are sandwiches, too; they, and some of the sides and desserts, including pastry chef Sarah Koechling's superb chocolate cake, also are available at Nonna's Sandwiches & Sundries, an adjacent takeout shop around the corner.

Formento's decor evokes old-school supper clubs while projecting a modern sensibility—grown-up but not the least bit stuffy. Attentive servers keep things moving; one of ours responded without judgment (or at least without rolling his eyes) to a request to take the background music down a notch; another quickly rectified the situation when our salad was missing an ingredient we'd been looking forward to and then comped the dish, to boot.

Just in time for warmer weather, a sidewalk patio is in the works.



Additional photos by Derek Richmond and Galdoes Photography

Roasted chicken "Vesuvio" with schmaltz potatoes

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