

the connecticut table

REVIEWS, RECIPES, RESTAURANT LISTINGS | EDITED BY VALERIE SCHROTH



A Taste of Tradition

BY ELISE MACLAY

TWO NEW TRATTORIAS EVOKE THE SIGHTS AND SMELLS (AND FLAVORS) OF SMALL-TOWN ITALY.

Italian chefs can and often do cook outside their genre, but when they achieve the possible dream, a restaurant of their own, their thoughts turn to the food they grew up on and loved as a child in Bari or Capri, Florence or Rome. Truffled pasta or nonna's meatballs, it's a taste of home, and we're invited to share when an Italian chef cooks from memory.

Cesco's Trattoria ★★★

Darien

Aldo Chiamulera was born in Tai di Cadore, a small mountain village in the north of Italy. Here, in the shadow of snow-covered peaks, for generations the people have lived close to the land, foraging for mushrooms, raising sheep, making cheese by hand, venerating family and celebrating life with good food and wine.

Thanks to style-setting chefs like Mario Batali, artisanal Italian cuisine, aka cucina rustica, is a hot ticket. Chiamulera grew up on it. And the trattoria he opened last year in Darien reflects that.

Cesco's Trattoria, named for Aldo's father, Francesco, is a sophisti-

cated riff on an Old-World Italian house in the country—arches, stucco, antique mirrors, modern wall sconces that look Medieval. Smart and stylish as it is, it's also warm and welcoming. Wander back toward the kitchen and you'll see a wall of framed family photographs: Aldo with his mother, with his grandmother, Aldo hiking with his father in the mountains. It makes you hungry to share that life—and that food.

Vegetable antipasti sets the tone. It's winter, so pan-fried cauliflower and tender-crisp Brussels sprouts stand in for the tomatoes and green beans of summer. Parmigiano Reggiano and marinated olives adorn the plate. Quality trumps quantity here. Portions are pleasing not belt-busting, and while the menu is comparatively short, there's plenty of variety. For example, when it comes to seafood, there's branzino, halibut, salmon and swordfish on the regular menu and a shellfish medley is proffered as a special.

But before moving on to entrées, we sample a few hot appetizers. Ed opts for Cesco's veal meatballs and raves. "They taste like veal," he says, and I know what he means. Too often nowadays, veal is almost tasteless. Tortellini en brodo is equally appealing. Homemade

JEFF KAUFMAN

At left, chef Aldo Chiamulera in the kitchen at Cesco's Trattoria; right, casunziei di Cortina, pasta pockets made with beet, Piave cheese, butter and sage sauce.

chicken soup and pasta? Who could resist? Especially when these cheese tortellini are feather-light, and the rich, fragrant broth floats tender leaves of fresh spinach.

A stuffed artichoke is a work of art. Lightly steamed so it remains green, the “stuffing” consisting of buttery toasted breadcrumbs and tiny capers strewn between each layer of leaves. We deconstruct this pretty green globe petal by petal, savoring the tender meatiness at the base of each.

Caesar salad is unexpectedly mundane, carelessly trimmed lettuce with a lackluster premixed dressing. On the other hand, there’s Cesco’s handmade casunziei di Cortina, refreshingly new to me but, our waiter informs us, a time-honored specialty of the Dolomite region. A kind of ravioli originally made with beetroot, it’s made here with sweet red beets, Piave cheese, butter and sage sauce and a sprinkling of poppy seeds. The interplay of sweet, salt and savory is exquisite.

Salmon and swordfish sound tempting but I hesitate. Both fish can be tricky to source, handle and cook, and I’m so picky I rarely like what I get. Emboldened by the quality of our meal so far, we order salmon *and* swordfish—plus osso buco to round out my pasta-fish-meat taste test.

When it comes to salmon, I like mine wild. And I *can* taste the difference. No matter how lightly cooked, farmed salmon is dryer, softer, more uniform in texture, and to me the taste is muffled. Wild salmon has a robust flavor and flakes away from the fork in silky petals—as Cesco’s salmon does, cooked medium-rare and kissed with a hint of red-wine glaze.

Swordfish sails in, firm but tender (not, as is often the case, flabby, rubbery or cottony). Gilded with ginger-orange vinaigrette, it’s juicy on its own, with a clean, deep-ocean flavor that pairs nicely with grilled artichoke hearts and a mixed-pepper soffritto.

We’re on a roll here and Cesco’s osso buco, Italy’s famous “bone with a hole” is a letter-perfect classic osso buco alla Milanese: a hefty veal shank, bone-in, marrow intact, braised in stock and white wine slowly and forever, until fat and muscle melt and the meat, permeated with aromatic sauce, literally falls from the bone. Sparked with traditional gremolata (lemon rind, garlic and parsley), it comes with a golden pile of saffron-scented rice.

House-made desserts are a carefully curated selection of classics. Satiny panna cotta, delicate tiramisu so light we fear it will float off the plate, and my favorite, a farmhouse-style Italian ricotta cheesecake with blueberry sauce. Of course, there’s gelato, too, as there might not be in the old homestead, but a trip to the gelateria is never amiss, es-



The ethereal Zia Anna tiramisu at Cesco's Trattoria makes a sumptuous finale.

pecially for tartufo cut to resemble a flower, its ice cream center just beginning to melt, its dark-chocolate shell still crisp.

While Cesco’s food and decor reference home and family and give the restaurant much of its charm, polish and professionalism are in evidence as well. Before opening Cesco’s in Darien, Aldo Chiamulera worked in big-city restaurants, including Nanni il Vallejo, in New York City. Crowds don’t faze him or his well-trained staff. On a Tuesday night the restaurant is jam-packed but everything goes smoothly, not only for us but for every table in sight. And the food, ah the food! *Bella Italia* on a plate.

Cesco's Trattoria

25 Old Kings Hwy., Darien

203/202-9985; cescostrattoria.com

Lunch Tuesday through Friday 11:30 to 2:30.

Dinner Tuesday through Thursday 5 to 10, Friday and Saturday till 11, Sunday 4 to 9. Wheelchair access. Major credit cards. Price range: appetizers \$9 to \$16, entrées \$19 to \$38, desserts \$7.

Trattoria Il Trullo ★

Avon

Buy a trullo, rent a trullo, refurbish a trullo for your vacation home. In Italy, it’s all the rage—which is only part of the reason Rocco Carbone named his recently opened restaurant in Avon for the ancient stone buildings with cone-shaped roofs that characterize the province of Bari where he grew up.

The elfin, *Lord of the Rings* quality of these strange structures is enough to enchant anyone, but for Carbone, who is 49 and lives with his wife and three children in Glastonbury, trulli are reminders of his childhood in Italy—most memorably the family dinners he gobbled up as a kid and early on helped prepare.

Naming a restaurant in a modern mini-mall for an old stone hut seems a bit odd. Happenstance or sophisticated joke? Either way, the well-designed space with plenty of parking should serve Rocco Carbone’s concept well, especially when full.

But it’s a hard launch. If you don’t know it’s there, you won’t know you’re there. Il

RATINGS

★★★★ Extraordinary

★★★ Superior

★★ Very Good

★ Good

Fair

Poor