

Spina: The Freshmakers

by Courtney Scott



In a city where new Italian eateries spring up weekly, it's refreshing to experience one that exists in a category of its own. Enter Spina, the city's first pasta house and the East Village's newest Italian addition. It was my first time inside the walls of a "fresh pasta house" and as I entered Neapolitan Chef Roberto Patriarca's new home (former homes include I Trulli and Felidia) I was delighted to see that pasta-making was in full swing. Taking center stage in the dining room is the pasta-producing alcove where, six nights a week, Spina's resident pasta maker, Blanca Rincon, twists and twirls fresh local ingredients into trays of whimsical shapes.

As I watched dozens of orechiette come to life I was greeted by Rob Terek, easily the city's most unpretentious sommelier whose enthusiasm for wine is infectious. Be sure to enjoy one of his recommended aperitifs before dining. The *Il Follo Cuvee Rose* prosecco is a light and summery pre-pasta pour.

With the stresses of the city slipping away and the warm summer breeze blowing into the rustic dining room, I casually sat down for what I suspected would be a special dinner. I was not disappointed.

Chef Patriarca's menu focuses on two key elements, simplicity and freshness. A *mpepata e cozze*, imported Neapolitan mussels in a white wine broth, should be ordered for the table without delay. There's nothing better than enjoying a heaping pile of steaming mussels with friends, then sopping up the peppery herb broth with bread. The spongy focaccia served at Spina is ideal for *la scarpetta* and the friendly atmosphere makes double-dipping absolutely acceptable!

With my sights now firmly set on pasta, and lots of it, I was anxious to discover what the chef had chosen for me. The orechiette that I had watched being made an hour earlier arrived promptly at my table dressed in a hearty rabbit ragu. Having eaten my fair share of orechiette in Italy, I was curious to see how this version fared.

Each little ear had just the right bite and firmness -- a good indication that "al dente" is not taken lightly here. Next came *malloreddus* bolognese and *cavatelli* with broccoli rabe, prepared with local produce. The broccoli, dressed lightly in olive oil and garlic, stuck to each piece of pasta and delighted my taste buds. I could have stopped here and been satisfied, but the pasta parade continued and the flavors grew in intensity.

The black ravioli stuffed with lobster should not be missed. Topped with a light champagne poppy seed cream sauce, each ravioli melts inside your mouth. If bold flavor is what you're after, go for the gnocchi and roasted eggplant. The secret ingredient is smoky scamorza cheese, a complex taste and good balance for such a dense pasta. With so many plates sampled, I should have been fuller, but I wasn't. This is the secret of fresh pasta and ingredients. While dry pasta can weigh you down, Spina's fresh pasta absorb flavor so much that you feel satisfied but not stuffed.

Seasonal ingredients even entered the dessert course, where an exotic blue raspberry panna cotta was served with Brooklyn-based Nicoletti espresso. Don't be fooled, it's as powerful a bean as any of its Italian competitors. My predictions for Spina's future are strong. Already attracting a legion of locals, Spina's primed to become a mainstay for pasta-lovers who want excellent value, top ingredients and friendly neighborhood charm.