

La Quercia's sister Italian restaurant La Pentola shines in Yaletown

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If there is one thing to remember when you go to the new La Pentola Della Quercia in the Opus Hotel, it is this: order dinner *famiglia* style.

This splendid way of sharing several dishes, so typical of Italian dining, isn't mentioned on the menu, but it's available indeed. Regrettably, we didn't ask, and curiously, our waiter didn't mention it, even though I overheard the foursome next to us order a family-style dinner for \$60 a head right when we were settling our bill. (A follow-up inquiry to the restaurant found that family style is an option—one that's even noted on the website—and price varies depending on what menu you build.) Going the a la carte route made it difficult to decide what to have, given the menu's breadth of appealing dishes, delivered by the extremely capable duo of Adam Pegg and Lucas Syme of Kitsilano's La Quercia.

{sidebar title='La Pentola Della Quercia'}

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Open daily 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. and 5 p.m. to 11 p.m. (or later on Fridays and Saturdays).

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Situated in the former Elixir digs, the space feels like one you'd see featured in a Restoration Hardware catalogue, classy but comfortable with white wooden finishes offset by shiny copper pots in glass display cases, funky copper light fixtures, dark wooden furniture, small floor tiles the colour of crostini, and what must be one of the healthiest Phalaenopsis orchids in Vancouver in the centre of the room.

La Pentola (which translates as "little saucepan") specializes in northern Italian cuisine (including nose-to-tail meat and fish dishes), but one of the highlights of dinner was from the country's south. The dreamy cheese called burrata was a special that night, but our waiter said the restaurant is hoping to regularly source the delicacy—which apparently was made in Napoli just three days before it appeared in front of us. *Burrata* means "battered", and, made with mozzarella and cream, the cheese is just as rich. Cloudlike in appearance and texture, the pure white mound was served very cold with crusty white bread and little side dishes of fine black pepper, coarse sea salt, and Arbequina olive oil from Spain—all nutty and aromatic. The burrata is the starter equivalent of a gentle embrace you never want to be released from. (Elsewhere, the chefs use local ingredients as much as possible. But in these parts the 100-mile diet isn't going to get you the world's best olive oil.)

You might need a translator for several of the menu items, but not for the must-have *souffle di parmigiano*. It looks like an upside-down muffin and, slightly crispy on the outside, tastes like a fluffier version of the best cheese bread you've ever had. Indulgent to be sure (especially after the burrata), this antipasti comes with a nice complement of thinly sliced zucchini.

Kale-and-ricotta-stuffed *pansotti* makes for a light primi to share. Tossed with walnut sauce, it showcases just how extraordinary simple pasta can be when it's made by pros (or, if you're lucky, your own Italian grandma).

Not-so-saucy osso buco (veal shanks whose name translates as "bone with a hole") is comforting if not necessarily memorable, served complete with a little silver spoon sticking out of the bone for you to scoop out the marrow. I'm perplexed by the ever-growing popularity of the jellylike substance, but humans have been sucking it back for centuries. It's high in nutrients, and some foodies find it downright decadent. (Marrow aficionados can also order a roasted version as an appetizer that comes with salsa verde.) Don't be fooled by the accompanying gnocchi, which is served Roman-style here, more pucklike than dumpling-ish, the deep golden sunflower colour coming from the semolina flour. An impossibly smooth carrot purée cozies up to fresh salmon that's rolled around Italian parsley and other herbs; this nightly-special secondi is perfectly cooked though subtle in flavour.

If you want your mind blown, save room for the lemon-cream dessert. Abundant in flavour, soft in texture, and topped with big blackberries and raspberries, it's worth visiting the restaurant for this alone. And order an Americano to go with it. Made with Lavazza special-reserve beans, it's among the city's best (in a city that has too many restaurants that invest in pricey espresso machines but not in training staff members on how to use them properly—a pet peeve).

Service is excellent, though the gentleman running the food was too rushed for questions on a recent early Friday evening visit. Since La Pentola is a hotel restaurant, it serves breakfast and lunch as well. (I like the sound of eggplant terrine with agro-dolce prawns and the beef-brisket panino for a midday meal.) Dinner for two with two glasses of wine, two antipasti, one primi, two secondi, two desserts, and a couple of Americanos came to \$143 before tax and tip.

A trip to La Pentola is a great alternative for those who've been wanting to try La Quercia but aren't willing to deal with its waiting list, which, according to our waiter, can be as long as two months. Taste the food here and

you'll see why. And remember to order family-style.

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