



The Florentine

RATING: ★★★

151 W. Adams St.,
312.660.8866

What the stars mean:

★ = fair, some noteworthy qualities;
★★ = good, above average;
★★★ = very good, well above norm;
★★★★ = excellent, among the area's best;
★★★★★ = world-class, extraordinary in every detail. Reviews are based on multiple visits. Ratings reflect the reviewer's overall reaction to food, ambiance and service.

WHAT TO WEAR: *Power suits during lunch and business casual for dinner.*

WHAT TO ORDER: *Bucatini carbonara, short rib braised in red wine, ricotta cheesecake.*

WHAT TO KNOW: *Roasted cauliflower with Calabrian chili relish is the best vegetable you'll eat all year.*

WHO GOES: *Traders, lawyers and hotel guests.*

WHAT IT COSTS: *Appetizers \$12-\$18; pastas \$15-\$28; entrées \$25-\$38; sides \$6-\$7; desserts \$9.*

The Sultan of Spaghetti

Ciao, bella! Todd Stein's picturesque pastas steal the show at a colorful new downtown spot.

| By Michael Nigrant | Photography by Anthony Tablier |

It used to be if you wanted to watch the Chicago Bears beat up on the Green Bay Packers while chowing down on really great pasta you needed an Italian grandmother with a big screen TV. No longer. The Florentine, a shiny new Italian restaurant in the even shinier new JW Marriott Chicago hotel at LaSalle and Adams, is now making the "gourmet Italian sports bar" fantasy a reality.

I doubt that was the five-year plan of management company BLT Restaurant Group, the powerhouse behind swank hotspots BLT Steak and BLT Prime in New York. Then again, based on the library-like shelves stuffed with cloth-bound books and burnished bric-a-brac, the bar outfitted with more flat-screen televisions than an airport lounge and the soaring dining room plastered with a confusing array of artwork, it's hard to tell what vibe they were going for.

The circular banquettes, tufted and trimmed with gold buttons, offer up hints of Italian Renaissance. Yet a cluster of abstract paintings on one wall looks like it was cribbed from the corner of a Monet landscape—Neo-Impressionist, maybe? But, that wouldn't explain the

glass Roman statues that look like they were stolen from the garden of a suburbanite who just struck it rich in the Illinois lottery, or those bookshelves, which dominate the décor in every direction I look. Confusing as they are, I can live with most of these choices, except maybe for the televisions, which really have no place in a restaurant unless its nightly special is wings. (Alas, such is the curse of the hotel restaurant—there are always those travelers who want to watch the game, and the Marriott dares not disappoint.)

While The Florentine doesn't offer Buffalo's finest, it does serve mozzarella fritti, aka deep fried cheese. But a gooey, fresh version by chef Todd Stein (poached from his former restaurant Cibo Matto at the nearby Wit hotel) is the black-tie cousin of the freezer-section sticks usually served with jalapeño poppers in a plastic red basket. Oil-cured tomatoes, tangy and rich, sub in for canned marinara—and the sweet pop of golden raisins and buttery finish of toasted pine nuts make me wonder if there really should be a chain of sports bars catering to ritzy CEOs.

UNDER THE TUSCAN SUN Clockwise from top left: Bucatini carbonara with pancetta and a fried egg; chef Todd Stein in one of the restaurant's spacious booths; bookshelves creep in as part of the dining room décor. Below: Whitefish with cured tomatoes and roasted fennel.



Executives certainly flock to The Florentine. That, or based on all the dark suits surrounding me when I visit for lunch, I'm being stalked by the FBI. Part of this crowd is no doubt due to the restaurant's location near the Financial District. But it's also probably because The Florentine is the antidote to the sardine-pack seating trend popping up elsewhere. Many of the tables in the 7,000-square-foot dining room are about six feet apart, guaranteeing that businessmen or G-men could plot anything they desire with little chance of being overheard.

The separation also helps with noise control. As in, when you yelp gleefully after biting into a firm but silky candy-wrapper-shaped caramelle pasta, you won't startle the tables around you. The dish is stuffed with velvety squash and studded with shaved aged ricotta salata and crispy bits of almond-perfumed amaretti cookie.

While I'm slurping a bounty of bucatini carbonara (one of the only pastas not made in-house), licking the runny egg yolk and chomping on salty bits of house-cured pancetta, the wide table berth also ensures that I don't accidentally flick a little errant sauce on nearby patrons.

For a while pasta had become one of those dishes that I generally avoided as a critic. Everyone had them, they often tasted the same and there was really very little you could learn about a restaurant from consuming them. Then, last year at Cibo Matto, I had Stein's squid ink spaghetti alla chitarra with its yin yang of soothing mint and smiting chili and rediscovered a love of the form. My ardor certainly continues at The Florentine, where there's no denying Stein's fingers harbor the soul of a Tuscan grandmother. The same squid ink spaghetti is even on the menu here.

Such attention to craft doesn't quite extend to our waiter, who describes almost every white on the wine list as being like Pinot Grigio. Mid-meal, we wonder if maybe someone put out a hit on him. A little bit later, the guy mysteriously disappears for the rest of the night after delivering a batch of sweetbreads—which, though slightly soggy, are redeemed by the bright citrus and slight bitter bite of the fried lemon garnish. He is replaced by a waitress who tells me she doesn't know where the bucatini is from.

Luckily, the food she's bringing out speaks for itself. The sea bream's buttery flesh is tempered by the perfect pan-seared plank of crispy skin and drizzled with a fine bracing vinaigrette whose only flaw is that it displays none of its advertised lobster essence. Though a short



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rib braised in red wine and served with melting mini cippolini onion sounds like an obligatory red meat course, the dark, glazed caramelized crust eats like a brisket burnt end from the finest Kansas City BBQ joint. Likewise, the underlying flesh on the rib displays an integrity I prefer to the usual mush many chefs consider a proper braise.

Though I have not been generous toward our waitress' performance, she does get the last laugh. While my Italian is pretty much confined to phrases I learned from the Godfather trilogy, I tell my friends I think the bombolini on the dessert menu is a chocolate dome of some sort. Our waitress interjects that, no, in fact, they are hot, crescent-shaped, sugar-dusted donuts served with a trio of dipping sauces. They are fresh and piping hot, but it's the ricotta cheesecake, featuring sour cherry preserve sauce, a caramelized sugar crackle-top and a whisper of chestnut honey that'll definitely have me pigging out at the bar as a regular... watching, I suppose, Bulls games for the rest of basketball season. ■



From top: It's all business at The Florentine, where suits and skirts pack the booths and tables; butternut squash caramelle.