



Clockwise from top left: The bar at Aldino's; the cozy dining room; squid ink spaghetti à la chitarra with braised calamari, tomatoes and pangrattato.



**ALL IN THE FAMILY** Anna's veal meatballs at Aldino's are inspired by a recipe from chef Dean Zanella's grandmother.

## Zanella's Modern Life

312 Chicago alum Dean Zanella bucks tradition  
| By Michael Nagrant | Photography by Dave Slivinski |

A good panna cotta should jiggle like a woman's breasts. Or so says British bad boy Jay Rayner, a judge on last season's *Top Chef Masters*. But he hasn't tried the version at Aldino's, a modern new Italian spot from former 312 Chicago chef Dean Zanella. It's wobbly, yes. It's also orange-vanilla perfumed, capped by a crispy orange-and-grapefruit tuile that looks like a sailboat's billowing spinnaker, and sets a new standard for the dessert. A scoop of it feels like eating a citrus-spritzed cloud. It's likely the closest you can get, without drugs, to experiencing The Beatles' "tangerine trees and marmalade skies."

Though it was the final dish of what was a wonderful meal, I start with a discussion of dessert (and from time to time we all should start with dessert, especially when it's for breakfast) because it encapsulates what Aldino's is about: innovation on the tired, Chianti-crazy, red sauce joint.

Granted, there are some traces of the typical Italian restaurant—my wife and I are sitting in a leather, Rat Pack-friendly banquette, gazing at a shiny tin ceiling while sipping a Manhattan and a lush, berry-forward 2008 Andrew Faccio Barbera d'Asti. But the Manhattan is spiked with Campari, a nice bitter antidote to the cloying candied cherry at the bottom of the Martini glass.

Our server wears a frilly, tuxedo-like top à la the waitstaff at Rosebud, but she's also rocking a hip pair of deep indigo jeans. Unlike her compatriots from Taylor Street, she's not dismissive or bored, but engaged, and when our three-year-old son breaks a glass, empathetic.

Yeah, we order meatballs as big as golf balls. Heck, they're even from grandma's recipe (chef Zanella's grandmother, Anna). But I doubt she ever ground hers so fine and topped them with creamy, tangy shards of



sheep's milk ricotta salata. And the handmade pasta comes out a stunning eyeliner black—a squid ink spaghetti à la chitarra so tender, we eat around the stinky old calamari it's tossed with to get our fill.

Our server arrives next with an Excalibur-sized steak knife, meant for the veal scallopini (one of just two dishes that exceeds \$20, and big enough to warrant it). But the meat is so tender, we cut off hunks with the backs of our forks. The usual briny capers and cardboardy white mushrooms have been replaced with chopped farm-fresh pea shoots and hunks of earthy, silky Royal Trumpet mushrooms featuring hints of cherry and almond.

Not everything here is reimaged. After dinner, we duck through the curtained entryway to the market next door and discover a straightforward nod to the classic Italian grocery. Shelves brim with a glinting kaleidoscope of jarred pickled peppers, golden olive oils and ruddy wine vinegars. And for this nostalgia, Aldino's needs no apology, for we can also take home a dozen of Anna's meatballs, and more importantly, a slice of the panna cotta, just in case we want a midnight snack. We will. ■

### Aldino's

626 S. Racine St.,  
312.226.9300

**HOURS:** Mon.-Sat. 4PM-10PM;  
Sun. (brunch) 10AM-2PM and  
(dinner) 5PM-9PM; market open  
Mon.-Sat. 11AM-7PM.

### THE DEAL MAKERS

Anna's veal meatballs with  
ricotta salata, \$6

Veal scallopini with Royal  
Trumpet mushrooms, asparagus  
and pea shoots, \$22

Orange-vanilla scented panna  
cotta with a grapefruit and  
orange tuile, \$6