

# eat & drink



Cannellini with Sunday gravy at Formento's

## THAT'S amore

### New- and old-school unite at Formento's

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

There are a lot of things Chicago doesn't need more of: potholes, corruption, red light cameras and polar vortexes, to name a few. On the dining scene, that list includes taquerias, steakhouses and Italian restaurants—there are arguably plenty to go around. Italian-wise, we've got fancified gourmet versions such as Balena, Nico Osteria and Acanto. There are plenty of old-school red sauce joints like Tufano's, Sabatino's and La Scarola, and enough Rosebuds to fill the White House Rose Garden. What we don't have is a red sauce joint running with the

aplomb of a modern restaurant group. Until now. The folks behind Balena and The Bristol—John Ross and Phil Walters, aka B Hospitality—along with chef/partner (and former Balena sous chef) Tony Quartaro, have now put down a stake with the opening of Formento's, their attempt at old-school Italian run with modern sensibility. I stopped in to see if it would be a red sauce revelation or a limp noodle.

#### Come fly with me

There's something charming about cozing up in a 50-year-old faded red vinyl booth and sitting where Frank Sinatra or Dean Martin once did. And yet, the fact is some spots pimping the faded black-and-white photos

of Ol' Blue Eyes are trading on cheap history. The red sauce is underseasoned and the noodles overcooked; look closer and that red vinyl might be repaired with duct tape. Not so at Formento's, where the only true nod to nostalgia is a big fake arrangement of alabaster fruit sitting center of the dining room, similar to one owned by Ross' grandmother, Nonna Formento herself. The decor—gleaming mahogany banquettes, red dome chandeliers and slick swaths of chocolate-colored wood trim around the booths—seems like it would suit Michael Buble rather than Sinatra. With all the handsome bearded dudes and ladies in glimmering heels dining around me, Formento's felt less Sunday night gravy and more Saturday night soiree.

#### Red sauce reimagined

But there is Sunday gravy (\$16), magnificent meaty red sauce infused with simmered pork neck bones, emulsified fat and braised pancetta. A big juicy meatball and links of fennel sausage take a bath in that sauce, and it's all spooned tableside over house-extruded cannellini, a pasta shape that looks like a hybrid of macaroni and rigatoni. Then food runners sprinkle cheese from a granny china-patterned tureen over the noodles. Pink quail breasts (\$29)—stuffed with sage, wrapped in prosciutto and tightly wound with caul fat before being roasted into fat sausage-like lobes—are as rich as beef, lying on dollops of fontina cheese cream sprinkled with toasted hazelnuts. Though I relished the chance



Shrimp scampi at Formento's

to sample a rabbit crepe for its novelty, my server pushed the chicken parmesan instead. The parm (\$25) was lithe and crispy, mostly due to a mix of matzo in the breading, and each juicy bite of Amish chicken burst with spicy oregano and the anise-flavored punch of micro-basil.

Most revelatory of all, though, was the shrimp scampi (\$29), a dish I've never had outside of the broiled garlic-butter swamp served at Red Lobster. Here, New Zealand langoustines full of plump, sweet meat were topped with a fluffy rock shrimp mousseline and bathed in rich garlic butter punched up with bright white wine vinegar. I devoured the langoustines quick, which led to my only complaint about Formento's, that this dish wasn't served up with crusty bread to soak up the remaining butter sauce. Also falling into the reinvention department was a complimentary starter of house-made giardiniera. At one point, I spooned the slivered florets of cauliflower, chunks of carrot and celery and fiery bits of serrano and calabrian chili directly in my mouth. I never thought an AI's Italian beef could be improved upon, but if they subbed in Formento's giardiniera for their own, they'd rule the world. No beef in sight, I spooned it over golden triangles of incredible house-baked focaccia.

**That's hospitaliano**

Maybe more incredible than the food is that just a few days after opening, the service was impeccable. Walking into the restaurant, the seas parted as servers and food runners stepped aside, beckoned and guided me to my destination. There's a Disney World-esque discipline of smiling and greeting you at Formento's as if you're the most important

person in the room, something you rarely see outside of super high-end places such as Sixteen or Acadia. Though I'm a dude, experiencing the gratitude and deference of the staff, I imagined this is what it must have felt like to be Audrey Hepburn.

**Time for wine**

I spent about two minutes with the thick green leather-wrapped wine list before wine director Steven Morgan (a vet of Alinea) noticed and bounded over to offer his stewardship. The bottle selection is both deep and wide—think 600-plus bottles, 120 Italian varietals—as are the 30-plus by-the-glass selections. The list, which also includes a history of how winemaker George Vare pioneered ribolla gialla and pinot grigio varietals in Napa Valley, reads like a book. I especially enjoyed Morgan's recommendation of the Masi Campoforin red blend, which was smooth and full of cherry and spice. My date and I ordered two different wines by the glass, and, unprompted, Morgan offered to split each of the pours so we could taste both wines with our meal.

**Bottom line**

Though there is no lack of Italian restaurants in Chicago, there is no refined red sauce experience quite like this. Killing an order of shrimp de jonghe at Sabatino's or whiling away an evening over pasta e fagiole at La Scarola is always fun. However, Formento's bests all comers with its fine service and its commitment to elevated cooking.

MICHAEL NAGRANT IS A REDEYE SPECIAL CONTRIBUTOR. REPORTERS VISIT RESTAURANTS UNANNOUNCED AND MEALS ARE PAID FOR BY REDEYE. REDEYE@REDEYECHEGAGO.COM | @REDEYEATDRINK

**ABBVIE CLINICAL PHARMACOLOGY RESEARCH UNIT**

Grayslake Campus J50  
480 S. US Highway 45  
Grayslake, IL 60030  
[www.abbviephase1.com](http://www.abbviephase1.com)

**Looking for Healthy WOMEN**

Who do not smoke or take any medications  
Average weight for height  
Women who are sterile or post-menopausal to participate in a clinical research trial  
Age 18 to 60

1 Period:  
6 days/5 nights  
4 outpatient visits  
\$2800.00

For more information or to make a screening appointment call:  
**1-800-827-2778**

**another Cold Sore?**

Millions of Americans experience recurrent outbreaks of the cold sore virus.

We are seeking healthy individuals age 18 and older with a history of **recurring cold sore outbreaks**. They may qualify for a clinical research study of an investigational topical cold sore medication if they have at least 3 cold sore outbreaks a year. Compensation of up to \$625 is available for time and travel to those who qualify.

Call for more information  
**1.800.494.2227**  
515 N. State Street, Suite 2700, Chicago, IL  
[www.radiantresearch.com](http://www.radiantresearch.com)  
Find us on Facebook

**RADIANT RESEARCH**

We Can't Do It Without YOU!