

# eat & drink

Prosciutto fig pizza  
LENNY GILMORE/REDEYE PHOTOS



## CAUSE A SCENE

### BAR SIENA'S ITALIAN FARE WOWS IN WEST LOOP

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

**W**elcome to the era of the bro-staurant. A bro-staurant is characterized by massive dining rooms, menus that rival the length of a “Harry Potter” novel, flocked wallpaper, brick and reclaimed wood elements, celebrity chefs, a hefty collection of vinyl records and at least one massive flat-screen TV at the bar so you don’t have to miss the Cubs when that pasta craving hits. Dineamic Group and its partners David Rekhson and Lucas Stoioff, founders of Siena Tavern, Prime & Provisions, Bull & Bear, Public House, Mercato and the defunct Stone Lotus, are Chicago’s masters of the form. Bar Siena, their newest project located in the West Loop, might be their greatest bro-sterpiece yet.

### The lady oven and the olive tree

Almost every element previously outlined is deployed at Bar Siena—and then some. There’s a DJ booth, a chandelier made of old microphones, a beat-up vintage Campari sign on the second level, a random painting of a bicycle and a two-story, LED-lit olive branch sculpture, a nod to the Siena restaurants’ logo. “When we were in Italy, we were taking photos of all the olive trees,” Rekhson said. “Fabio [Viviani] was like, ‘Why are you doing that? They’re just trees. They’re everywhere.’ We’re like, we don’t have these in Chicago. They’re beautiful. We wanted to capture that with the sculpture.”

There are also light fixtures made of

plumbing pipe. Desserts are served on flowery, nona-worthy china. There’s a gas-fired pizza oven covered in red glass tile called Bella, referred to on the restaurant website as “the hottest girl in town.” It’s likely a matter of time before the oven gets its own Twitter account like the Siena Tavern meatball (@sienameatball). The only way Bar Siena could be more mod-Italian cool is if Audrey Hepburn showed up and scooted around the bar on a Vespa.

### The famous Fabio

As at sister restaurant Siena Tavern, the Dineamic guys have teamed up with former “Top Chef” contestant Fabio Viviani. If you’ve never seen him in action, Viviani

is adept at tripping coyly over American idioms with his slight Italian accent. He's warm, gracious and so charming he could probably get away with punching babies. "This new kitchen [at Bar Siena] with the open setup is great," Rekhson said. "When Fabio has been expediting these last few weeks at the pass, people have been coming up and taking pictures and shaking his hand. People love it." When Viviani is away, executive chef Jeremy Tannehill (Public House) mans the ship.

### The long and winding menu

Tannehill and Viviani's menu has more than 50 choices. There's literally something for every bro. I started with the grilled octopus (\$17) draped over chopped shishito peppers and charred escarole glistening in a fiery chili vinaigrette. The tentacles were tender and smoky, and the peppers grassy, sweet and spicy. Impressed by the texture of the octopus, I asked Tannehill the secret to their tenderness. "We go through a hundred pounds a day," he said. "It's really popular, so I don't want to give away the secret, but we do it with love and attention." I don't know if true bros can deal with that kind of kitchen sensitivity, but hey, keep on lovin' that octopus, Chef. It's fabulous.

Also fabulous: the scotch egg (\$14). Though, being an Italian restaurant and all, they should have renamed it a Siena or Sorrento egg. Most Scotch eggs are clunky drunk food featuring overcooked hard-boiled eggs wrapped in deep-fried slabs of sausage. Siena's egg, which sits on a cloud of truffle-perfumed, mascarpone-larded polenta, is soft-boiled and deliciously runny. Its casing is a delicate, rosy-colored housemade prosciutto sausage whose richness is foiled by a confetti dice of zingy piquillo pepper relish.

Not so fabulous: a salad of under-salted, mandoline-sliced zucchini (\$12) tossed with arugula, crumbly farmer's cheese and over-fried, bland chickpeas. While pretty, the zucchini wasn't as delicate as the menu described, but more like thick ribbons that required a lot of fork and knife work. That's OK, though. Everyone knows bros don't eat zucchini.

But they do like pizza, and I'm happy to report that the pies coming out of Bella are some of the best Neapolitan pizzas in town (Watch out, Nellcote!). Charred, blistered and featuring a springy chew, this is the kind of dough I dream of. The prosciutto fig pizza (\$17), a pie with full-moon rounds of fruity fig sidled up next to funky bits of taleggio cheese drizzled with sweet mellow

local honey, yielded one of the most satisfying and balanced slices I've eaten all year.

The pasta too is incredible, and all of Bar Siena's noodles are made in-house. My favorite was a bowl of duck mac 'n' cheese (\$19), orecchiette tossed with mushroom and silky slices of duck dripping with richer-than-Warren-Buffett foie gras cream. A dish of agnolotti (\$19) stuffed with burrata was also quite elegant, though some of the lobster meat served with the pasta was a touch mealy.

### A spritz and a miss

A scene isn't a scene without a healthy list of cocktails, and Bar Siena has eight on offer from consulting mixologist Revae Schneider of Femme du Coupe. The No. 5 (\$13)—a peach-colored spritzer filled with Aperol, Lillet rose, lavender honey, lemon juice, tonic and a sprig of thyme—was eminently refreshing. The No. 7 (\$13), featuring Don Julio tequila, white grape, green tea, lime juice, grapefruit bitters and tonic, tasted mostly like watery grape juice and was garnished with a floppy unappetizing basil leaf.

### A delightful doughnut window

Dessert from Dineamic's corporate pastry chef Amy Arnold is so good, the pastries at Bar Siena could be the basis of their very own bakery. Technically, they are, as they're served both in the

restaurant and from a take-out window on Green Street, a restaurant within the restaurant called BomboBar. The bomboloni (\$3 each), overflowing with maple buttercream and dusted in fine sugar, are better than any doughnut coming out of dedicated emporiums such as Glazed and Infused or Stan's Donuts. The caramel-noted honeycomb gelato (\$5) rivals the best of Black Dog Gelato's offerings, and the chocolate chip cannoli (\$6), featuring a crispy crusted wafer-thin cannoli filled with dark chocolate sliver-adorned cream, is the best cannoli I've had since Pasticceria Natalina closed. The most sweet-toothed of bros will be satiated.

### Bottom Line

Bar Siena is a scene, but it's a scene with killer pizza, pasta, Italian desserts and an incredible two-story-tall, LED-lit olive tree art installation worth checking out.

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Duck mac 'n' cheese



Maple buttercream bomboloni



BomboBar window

REVIEW  
Bar Siena  
832 W. Randolph St.  
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★★★★★  
Off to a good start