

eat & drink

REVIEW
MONTEVERDE1020 W. Madison St.
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Heating up

Fresh pasta decorates
the bar at Monteverde.
MICHAEL TERCHA/TRIBUNE

 A large photograph showing numerous strands of fresh, light-colored pasta hanging from a wooden rack in a kitchen setting. The pasta has a wavy, ruffled texture. The background is slightly blurred, showing kitchen equipment and warm lighting.

NOODLES & COMPANY

MONTEVERDE IS A PASTA PALACE IN WEST LOOP

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

What does a reality TV chef from Houston who started out cooking Creole cuisine know about Italian food? It turns out a lot. In fact, you could say Sarah Grueneberg, executive chef and partner of Monteverde, a new restaurant and pastificio (a fancy name for a pasta or macaroni factory) in Chicago's West Loop, is a master and innovator of the form.

GREEN MOUNTAIN RISING

It wasn't always that way. "I'm a kid from Texas who grew up cooking at Brennan's in Houston where soulful Creole sauces were the thing," Grueneberg said. "When I first moved to Chicago to work as a line cook, my idea of Italian food was very Italian American, stuff like parmesan, ricotta, marsala. I was lost over the idea that you could make this fantastic sauce with only simple olive oil."

That was 2005. By 2008, Grueneberg was running the kitchen at Spiaggia. Inspired by trips to Italy, the tasting menus she was

producing at what was already a four-star restaurant hit their peak. Frankly, I was a little sad when she set off to do "Top Chef: Texas" in 2011, where she placed as runner-up to winner Paul Qui, because I missed her cooking. She returned but left Spiaggia in 2013 to build her own restaurant with partner Meg Colleran Sahs (Terzo Piano). I couldn't wait to check it out.

In her time off, Grueneberg consulted and traveled. She returned often to Emilia-Romagna, a region in northern Italy, where she stayed busy eating and forging friendships.

One of those friends, Andrea Bezzecchi, a noted balsamic vinegar producer of Acetaia San Giacomo, unknowingly named her future restaurant. "I carry a travel journal and I ask people I meet to write in it. My name is German for green mountain," Grueneberg said. "Andrea had written in my journal that from now on when I come to Italy I would be known as Monteverde, the Italian translation of my last name. I was so taken. I loved the fact that these people had accepted me into their culture."

**VINEGAR BARRELS
AND A PASTA FACTORY**

Though Karen Herold of Studio K (Perennial Virant, Girl and the Goat, Balena and more) designed the homey restaurant interior filled with honey-colored woods, blue- and plum-hued chairs and beige accents, Bezzecchi had some influence on the decor as well. Above the bar at Monteverde, there's a group of wooden barrels made of mulberry, acacia, ash and chestnut. While they look cool, they're

also a functional working solera system that produces aged balsamic vinegar that will eventually be used in the restaurant. That alone would be cool, but just below those barrels is a working pasta factory, where thousands of noodles dry and fresh pasta is filled and rolled to order.

SNACK TIME

But before we get to the pasta, we should talk about snacks (stuzzichini) and small plates (piattini). We should also discuss Grueneberg's sly genius. Lots of people fall in love with Italy, come back and try to replicate what they ate with good intentions, ending up with classic but uninspired facsimile dishes. What sets Grueneberg apart is that she's not only an Italian cook but an international one. Her dishes are Italian in spirit but spiked with ingredients and techniques inspired by travels to Spain, Asia and the American South.

Consider octopus spiedini (\$8): Fat, wobbly, seawater-kissed octopus tentacles and char-grilled leeks are skewered alongside



The Mozzarella e Ham
MICHELLE KANAAR PHOTO FOR REDEYE

salt-roasted sweet potatoes dusted with smoked paprika. The skewers are nestled in a peperonata made of roasted red pepper, onion and tomato. It's sweet, smoky and addictive, a superior Italian salsa I lapped from my spoon long after the octopus was gone. "When I went to Tokyo, the grocery stores had pre-packaged yakitori that was amazing," Grueneberg said. "I was like, 'If the shish kabob in my grocery stores looked like that here, I'd be all over it.' I wanted to bring that to Monteverde."

Her arancini (\$7) is filled with creamy Italian rice, but it's also brimming with 'nduja, spreadable Italian salami bursting with chili and salty notes. The finished product is mounted on oil-poached tuna.

There's a plate called mozzarella e ham (\$13) that looked suspiciously like a caprese salad of sorts, sans basil. Though I trust Grueneberg, visions of rubbery, waterlogged mozzarella and insipid tomatoes danced in my head. But I was rewarded with orbs of mozzarella di bufala so creamy I'm convinced it was actually burrata. Though it's December, cherry tomatoes from Mighty Vine of Rochelle, Ill., were a deep shade of crimson and exploded with the fruity essence of summer.

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Not only does Grueneberg cook with international flavors, but she's always been committed to expanding her repertoire beyond the Italian kitchen. Prior to the "Top Chef" finale, she staged with Bill Kim of the "Belly" empire, and as a result of that relationship was inspired to wok-fire orecchiette for her arrabiata (\$15), which features plump gulf shrimp, toasted garlic, tomato and hot pepper oil. I liked the heat and the shrimp, but there could be a touch more tomato here, and the pasta is a bit overcooked and soft.

But this is easy to forgive when followed by steamed pinwheel rounds of housemade cannelloni saltimbocca (\$15) stuffed with lamb belly, manchego, prosciutto and sage. The rounds are caramelized in the pan and plated

with a nutty, velvety-smooth cauliflower bechamel. The combination is richer than a hedge fund manager, but a smart swoosh of balsamic vinegar lightens the load and keeps each bite from sending me into a carb-induced slumber.

You could wisely spend all your stomach capacity on pasta here, but there are other options to consider. I opted for the stuffed cabbage (\$12-\$14) featuring a ragu of mushrooms, corn-perfumed fleecy-soft polenta, a runny duck egg and a cabbage leaf stuffed with mustard greens, parsnips, kohlrabi and saltine crackers spiked with nutmeg and allspice. The aromatic cabbage filling was certainly better than the oversteamed rice and beef glop I had at so many Polish buffets growing up.

SUNDAES AND SALTED BUTTERSCOTCH BUDINO

A few weeks ago, I raved about the talents of Meg Galus, pastry chef of Boka Group. I am currently equally smitten with the work of Monteverde pastry chef Sara Lamb (Soho House). Her budino (\$8) is custardy, salty, sweet and crowned with a crackling sugar top. I'd take this over creme brulee all day. She also whips up a sundae (\$8) featuring milk and honey ice creams drizzled with caramel and topped with a sesame-studded praline with bittersweet notes that delighted and jolted me from what could have been a sugary stupor.

BOTTOM LINE

Grueneberg has managed to create an a la carte Italian experience fused with Spanish and Asian flavors for those who crave the technique and ingredient quality of Spiaggia but don't have the extravagant budget to dine there.

REPORTERS VISIT RESTAURANTS UNANNOUNCED, AND MEALS ARE PAID FOR BY REDEYE.
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**** PROCEED WITH CAUTION *** GIVE IT SOME TIME
** TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT * OFF TO A GOOD START
***** HEATING UP ***** ALREADY HOT

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