



A PIECE OF THE PIE Clockwise from left: Handcrafting a cocktail; the soaring ceilings and globe-like light fixtures; a rhubarb and ricotta cheese pizza

Go Team!

Two Chicago culinary powerhouses come together to launch the city's most anticipated new Italian spot, and there's plenty of *amore* to go around.

| By Michael Nigrant | Photography Anthony Tablier |

The old adage is that too many cooks spoil the broth. But, based on my recent experience at Balena, a new rustic Italian joint venture between the Boka Restaurant Group (GirL & the Goat, GT Fish & Oyster, Boka and Perennial Virant) and the team behind Bucktown's The Bristol, there is no such problem with having a bevy of owners. Rather, it creates quite the superb bowl of soup.

Balena's dining room features a tangle of exposed timbers, rustic twine-wrapped globe lanterns and majestic vaulting. This whole structure towers over a patchwork of neon light tubing and a gigantic glossy custom clock that looks like it was cribbed from a secret Swatch "Viva Italia" line. The warmth, the scale and the grandeur of the surroundings make you feel not so much like you've entered a restaurant, but instead that you've gone to church.

Just as much as Balena is a cathedral of cuisine and a place to see and be seen, however, it's also a place

to hide. With its lower clapboard rafters, smattering of tile and built-in cabinets outfitted with exposed rough wood trim and blacksmith-worthy latches, the second-floor dining room right off the kitchen feels a bit like dining in a private wine cellar. And if that's not intimate enough, there's an actual private dining room in the basement wine cellar you might be inclined to buy out if you're a celebrity, or just want to dine like one for an evening.

Really, though, it's tough to even think about wine, when Balena offers such an interesting liquor selection. Mixologist Debbi Peek created 16 cocktails that explore the wide world of Italian digestif liquors, or *amari*. The cocktails are arranged on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the most bitter. I see the 10-rated "FIB" cocktail, a mix of Amaro dell Erborista, Ransom gin and pink grapefruit, as a challenge to my masculinity and order it immediately. Like a well- CONTINUED...

Balena

1633 N. Halsted St.
312.867.3888
balenachicago.com

Open for dinner: Mon.-Thu.
5-10PM; Fri. 5-11PM, Sat.
4:30-11PM and Sun. 4:30-10PM

Appetizers: \$10-\$26
Pizzas and pastas: \$10-\$19
Entrées: \$19-\$65
Desserts: \$8

What to Eat

"Korean-cut" short ribs,
rhubarb pizza, linguine
carbonara, affogato dessert

Crock Star

Chef Chris Pandel rocks out housemade noodles on a *chitarra*, which translates as "guitar" because the steel strings that cut the pasta look like the strings on a guitar.

Clocking In

The custom clock in the main dining room, designed by 555 International, was inspired by the chronographs on vintage car dashboards.

Bar None

That's not some newfangled soft wood. Balena's 20-seat bar top is made of saddle-stitched leather.

Moda Italia

Never have there been so many supple leather Gucci loafers and Ray-Ban Aviator sunglasses gathered in one room.

The Baker and Charcuterie Maker

Head baker Peter Becker turns out the pizza dough and crusty ramp crostini, while the ruddy, silky salumi come from Chris Ely and Smoking Goose Meatery in Indianapolis.



...CONTINUED balanced IPA beer, the citrus of the grapefruit and the spicy sweet anise tinge of basil in the FIB cocktail temper the blast of bitterness from the amaro, resulting in a well-balanced drink. It is so balanced, in fact, that I actually perceive the piney and lemon-perfumed "Rosemary" cocktail outfitted with a wallop of Aperol, Campari, sour and flamed rosemary (rated 2 on the bitterness scale) as more bitter.

Chef Chris Pandel, also the maestro de cuisine at Bucktown's The Bristol, has a similar enthusiasm for bitter flavors. His charred al dente rapini, astringent, smoky and lifted by a spritz of lemon, is as sexy as green vegetables come. Likewise the hefty meatiness of a grilled "Korean-cut" short rib is tempered by a burnt orange sauce that offers a bright bit of citrus and touches of caramel.

At Balena even kale, that bitter, invasive leaf that commandeers garden beds and infests CSA boxes, giving Gwyneth Paltrow ample platform to foist her recipes for kale chips on hapless soccer moms and unsuspecting children of the world, is fairly inspired. It's given the Caesar treatment and showered with whisks of Parmigiano-Reggiano, flaky hunks of oily sardine, crackling croutons and a creamy garlicky dressing. If franchise restaurants kicked the ubiquitous chicken Caesar to the curb in favor of this number, the world would be a better place.

Props to my server (sporting some fierce pigtail braids that would make Pippi Longstocking jealous) for directing me to the kale salad, something, as a fervent carnivore, I likely would have avoided. The service in general at Balena is anticipatory and friendly without being overbearing.

Sour flavors also get their due at Balena. Tangy rhubarb mingles with salty sweet pearls of ricotta cheese on pizza. The blistered chewy dough underneath is as fine as almost any pie in Chicago, although it falls just short of the angelic crust found on the pies at Nellcôte.



The pastas at Balena, however, get the better of those at Nellcôte. The carbonara, a tangle of satisfyingly chewy linguine tossed with sharp pickled ramps, shimmers with the yolk of a freshly breached egg. My only concern is that there are not nearly enough salty, crispy pancetta bits to round out the other soft elements in the dish.

Then again, any yearning for crispiness is mitigated by the shattery crust on Balena's "salt and pepper" chicken thighs. The flesh underneath is luscious and juicy and tender to the bone, and the salad of mustard greens underneath has a nice pungent kick.

Pandel's sweets partner, pastry chef Amanda Rockman, of The Bristol and *Top Chef Just Desserts* fame, also makes some killer dessert. Her conceit is not innovation as much as perfection of classics, whether that's a hot cinnamon sugared yeast doughnut and a shooter of affogato (a coffee-drenched creamy dollop of gelato) or a pistachio sundae topped with tender torrone, aka pistachio nougat.

Balena is one of the better restaurants I've eaten at in the last few years, on par with some of my recent favorites like Acadia and the now defunct Kith and Kin. Indeed, as its name translates, it's a whale of a restaurant. ■



NOW THAT'S ITALIAN
Clockwise from top left: Salt and pepper chicken thighs with mustard greens; a selection of Italian amari; made-from-scratch cocktail ingredients; chef Chris Pandel; affogato with gelato, doughnuts and espresso