

FOOD DRINK | DEAL



GRAPE NUTS Clockwise from left: The front bar at Ombra; a light fixture made from vintage newspapers; tongue with salsa verde

Seeing the Light

Andersonville hot spot Ombra dazzles with its stylish take on regional Italian cuisine.

| By Michael Nigrant | Photography by Anthony Tablier |

With so many restaurants in Chicago, unless there's a super chef or owner attached to the project, opening a new one is like throwing a grain of sand in the desert. If it's lucky, a hungry neighborhood sustains the restaurant long enough until the foodie-obsessed catch up and it starts to generate headlines. Bar Ombra in Andersonville is not one of those restaurants.

While it's a low-key place from the owners of the neighboring farm-to-table spot Acre, Ombra, which means "shadow" or "shade" in Italian, feels more like the Brad Pitt of Chicago restaurants on what should be a lazy Wednesday night.

I have never seen so many people stop in the middle of a run/evening walk/shopping excursion to parse a menu posted in a window. Sure, it's new and the interior design is eclectic. But it might be the exotic nature of the restaurant concept that eventually draws people inside. Though it is Italian-inspired, this isn't your average red sauce joint. Instead it is very narrowly focused on the cuisine of the Trentino, Friuli and Veneto regions.

Most of the curious are lured inside, overwhelmingly so, to the point that when I ask the host for a seat he looks at me like I just asked him for a crash course in quantum physics. He recovers, loops the room and points us to the last few seats in a communal table. We settle in to what feels like the underside of a fancy college dorm room loft. Designed by Alter Ego (Simone's, Ruxbin), the restaurant is filled with honeyed woods, recycled leather jacket banquettes and a wallpaper of yellowing newspapers. In addition to my cozy communal table, there's a smattering of individual tables and a long diner-

style row of seats overlooking the pre-prepared selection of cold appetizers.

Ombra is a great place to hunker down for a cool glass of white and a selection of light antipasti. The all-Italian wine-by-the-glass list is ample and reasonably priced. Then again, tucked away from the madness, it's sometimes tough to hail a server. But when we do, our guy is pretty helpful, directing us to some killer Ribolla Gialla, a white wine from Friuli with hints of grapefruit.

The wine has a nice acidic backnote that offers a great foil for the rich *cicchetti*, or small snacks, to come. We opt for the chef's choice of five for \$15, which seems like a value until you realize they heap a lot of forgettable cold bean and potato salads on the plate. We regroup and go our own way for a second round and are rewarded with zingy salsa verde dolloped on a slice of rich pork tongue and *bagna cauda*, a warm bath of velvety garlic butter with crisp bitter greens for dipping.

We move on to crispy orbs of arancini stuffed with spring peas and pillowy risotto, and *gamberi tramezzini*, cute little white bread triangles bursting with plump shrimp and spring-fresh sorrel pesto.

The thing at Ombra is not the cold *cicchetti*, as most of them lack any acidic, chili or herb punch, but the warm stuff like velvety *risi e bisi*, which is a traditional, seasonal Venetian risotto-style dish. Though you can make a meal of small plates there are plenty of bigger dishes like the *risi e bisi*, roast fish like pepper-crusting tuna or pan roasted salmon if you'd rather not share. Stick to those and Ombra turns out to be not a mere grain of sand, but quite the neighborhood dining oasis. ■

Ombra

5310 N. Clark St.,
773.506.8600,
barombra.com

HOURS

Sun.-Thu. 5-10PM,
Fri.-Sat. 5-11PM,
weekend brunch 11AM-3PM

Dealmakers

Bagna cauda\$8

Spring pea arancini\$6

Tiramisu\$6