



diningout

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NOT TOO TONY

Mantuano's Bar Toma fair game on Mag Mile

The "Capriole Goat Cheese," pizza—a savory affair of crunchy hazelnuts, dates, melted leeks and a splash of balsamic vinegar—is removed from the brick pizza oven at Bar Toma. (AL PODGORSKI - SUN-TIMES)

Bar Toma, the new wine bar/pizzeria/cafeteria/cafe from Spiggia's chef/partner (also notably Obama's favorite chef) Tony Mantuano, located a half block from the Magnificent Mile is spectacular... for tourists and Gold Coast residents.

I wish I could be more effusive. I have all the respect in the world for Mantuano. Gregarious, passionate and inspiring, he's definitely earned his place in the pantheon of four-star Chicago chefs. As Rick Bayless was to regional Mexican food, Mantuano was to luxurious pan-Italian food.

But while Mantuano has been a good ambassador for Italian ingredients and techniques, I've never quite felt he was as fastidious or as invested in Italian culture as Bayless was in Mexico. Frankly, I thought Spiggia was always a tad too conservative until a couple of years ago. It opened up quite a bit, whether doubling down on Italian beer offerings or creating interesting tasting menu themes, under executive chef Sarah Greenberg.

Mantuano's great strength is conjuring a vision, stepping back and setting loose an army of brilliant people to execute. This is not to say he's not actively involved in his restaurants. What's most surprising about Bar Toma is how such a huge operation that operates from early morning until late night serving hundreds of patrons such a variety of dishes can be so solid. Details, like making sure the cannoli are filled to order, the gelato is made with fresh fruit, and that dishes are dressed and garnished tableside, have Mantuano's fingerprints all over them. The craggy, tart, sweet raspberry gelato, which is shiny and luminous

like the hood of a freshly waxed cherry-red sports car, is one of the better things I've eaten in a long time. However, as good as that gelato is, servers don't seem to know where the raspberries came from. Gelato knowledge isn't the only problem. When I ask my server about the "Tasting of Toma Cheeses," a selection of three different cow's milk cheeses, she tells me that Toma is a play on Mantuano's

name and that the cheeses are made for the bar. She doesn't know anything about the provenance or the actual names of the cheeses. I still don't know what Late, except that there was some traffic in one of the cheeses and another was served with a nice tart and sweet mustard. Still, there are plenty of wacky recognizable choices like burrata bursting with mozzarella cream and basic fresh mozzarella featuring a pine-kernel smosh of sweet San Marzano tomatoes and spicy basil. Unfortunately, for about 20 minutes, my server also fails to notice my water carafe and glass is empty, so there is little to wash the cheese down with.

Like the service, the room can be a touch abrasive. The cluster-block wall filled with a ton of empty picture frames (apparently some kind of execution of an Italian family basement or a dive bar) is like the design equivalent of a con-man bombing on stage. Though it must be said, the bar side of the restaurant featuring a nice expanse of what looks like cheap-blond wainscoting also boasts a fancy new pump-colored, copper-top bar.

But, again, the food, or rather the process of making and displaying food, tempers the odder design elements. Shiny tubs of gelato, buttery pasta-filled casses, steaming espresso machines, and a fire-filled pizza oven conspire to kill you with a visual cornucopia of food porn.

But the eyes and the tongue do not always agree. The pizzas, which come out of that glorified brick oven, are a mixed bag. The crust is solid, but it's not a game changer like Great Lake's or even as variable in texture, i.e. featuring a satisfying mix of puff, crispiness and char, such as the ones served up at Spacca Napoli. The "Fork Belly Meatball" pizza, featuring dry, tasteless meat hunks defies the wisdom that pork makes everything better. The "Sicilian" pizza ups the game with pungent fennel, sweet winy bursts of raisin and luscious pork sausage.



The "pim-heel-style" burrata is bursting with creamy mozzarella and spicy fresh basil.



Bar Toma features a variety of dining areas with various decors.



The raspberry gelato is by far the best dessert option on the menu at Bar Toma.



The Rosticcino di Abruzzo boasts juicy, caramelized hanks of rosemary-seasoned lamb. (AL PODGORSKI - SUN-TIMES PHOTOS)

Toma with the frequency of a Dead-head. Speaking of the Dead, the fried lemon and cool wrapped in a Metamucil-capsule's worth of daily fiber including sesame, pumpkin and poppy seeds, is reminiscent of what might happen if a hippie co-op bulk bin smashed into a traditional fritto misto. The texture is so unfamiliar, buttery and satisfying. I may just require that all my deep-fried foods be coated in seeds forever.

Bar Toma's gelato chips are whisper-thin and shatter under the tooth like a Butterfinger candy bar. But not all fried food at Toma fares well. The sweetbread are a little dry. The second-flavor of La Quercia prosciutto and heady aroma of sage that envelop these nuggets of offal is blunted by too much residual fry oil.

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The grill has no such problems. The "Rosticcino di Abruzzo," featuring juicy caramelized hanks of lamb dripping with black truffle and garlic funk, is so rich, you imagine this is what summer BBQ at the Trump household might be.

While the raspberry gelato is glorious, the straciatella or chocolate chip-filled vanilla gelato has an ice-milk texture and waxy flavor. The cornetti (Italy's answer to the croissant) are also a touch too dense and crumbly.

Ultimately, though, the lows at Bar Toma never get too low. It is an incredible step up from the chain fare available nearby, henceforth a boon for the tourists. Though for the Mag Mile, I still prefer the intimacy and the focus of Purple Pig down the street. Still, the highs do get very high, as with the cool and the gelato, but not nearly enough to make it a destination. If I lived down the street though, I imagine I would eat at Bar Toma quite often.

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