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Review: Don't dare skip dessert at Cena

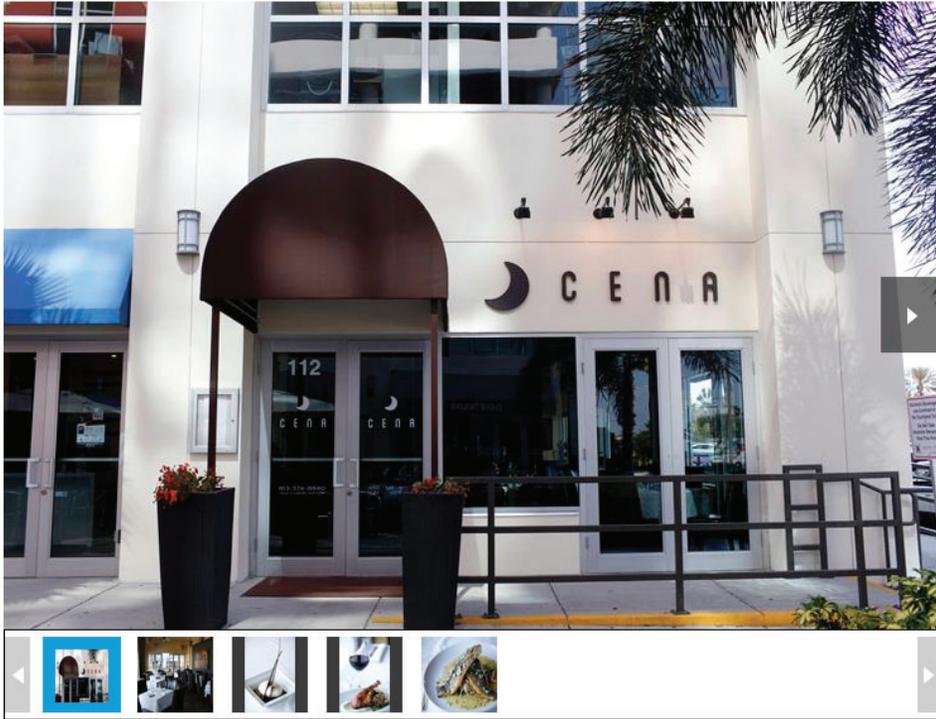


Laura Reiley, Times Food Critic

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By Laura Reiley
Times Food Critic

TAMPA

This never happens. I walk in. The host is a little snooty. The place is chilly, physically and metaphorically, and there's a soundtrack of the kind of smooth jazz that's one step above waterboarding. I think to myself, "Ech, another new restaurant where reviewing is hazard duty."

And then the food rocks.

The Grand Central in Tampa's vital Channel District has been up and running for a while. There's the Pour House and City Dog Cantina on one side of a central courtyard, and since August 2011, Stageworks Theatre has been ensconced on the other side of the courtyard. In March, adjacent to Stageworks, Cena opened. Susan Bianchi and Romeo Patron, owners of Bianchi's Enoteca, were brought in as consultants. But the smartest thing Grand Central owners Ken Stoltenberg and Frank Bombeeck did was to hire chef Michael Buttacavoli.

The dinner-only menu he's put together is resolutely Italian, but very personal. Buttacavoli was the chef de cuisine at SideBern's for eight years under Jeannie Pierola, and at her Ybor City restaurant, Boca, before that. More recently he's spent time at the Seminole Hard Rock, ending as chef at Council Oak. He's got chops, and perhaps more importantly from all that time spent with Pierola, he has the good sense not to try to be all things to all people, but rather to offer a short, idiosyncratic menu of items you won't find everywhere.

He's got help. Pastry chef Evan Schmidt also spent time at the Hard Rock. Here, though, he's doing desserts that merit serious

doubletakes. No one is doing desserts like this around here. The bococcini (\$9), say, brings caramel-crusted cream puffs stuffed with a pistachio cream and strawberries macerated in lemoncello, and these guys are bisected by thin wafers of milk chocolate so they look like Star Wars TIE fighters, and also on the plate are housemade almond macarons. And a scoop of marshmallow fluff-ish mascarpone cheese. Oh, just order it. Also, the zuppa inglese (\$9), the suave Italian version of trifle, this one with aerated sponge cake bits, roasted pinenuts, marinated peach chunks and whipped vanilla yogurt in a balloon wine glass. Not too sweet, great textures and probably not too calorically reprehensible.

On the savory side, Buttacavoli can start you off with a small bowl of salted, warm housemade sunchoke chips (\$4), while you consider whether to go with the mushroom arrancini (\$8, fried risotto balls with creamy, cheesy interiors) or a hearty bacon and eggs, Italian style (\$10): a potato frittata paired with a thin, juicy plank of pork belly, both of them admirably showcased with a tomato vinaigrette. The panzanella and Caesar salads (both \$10) are punchy, lively versions, the former a bread salad tossed in an unusual roasted red pepper vinaigrette.

For entrees, the asparagus risotto is textbook (\$9, good for light appetites or as a shared app), and the rustic Bolognese (\$16), served with seldom-seen calamaretti (short pasta tubes that look like calamari rings), brings a rich, nuanced meat sauce of braised pork and tender beef short rib. My favorite, though, was a straightforward seared filet mignon (\$28) napped with a little truffled cheese sauce and accompanied by roasted sunchoke and still-snappy skinny green beans and bits of pancetta.

I could keep going on entrees (ah, the branzino), but the wine list deserves a few words, as well. It's short and interesting, with notable house wine deals for \$5 (a Francois Montand Blanc de Blancs Brut retails for about \$10 a bottle, so Cena's \$24 bottle/\$5 glass is a fair price) and Italian bottlings that are far from grocery store fare.

Cena is small, with only nine tables indoors (but more than 30 out on the patio). For this reason, reservations are suggested. With this newcomer added to the building's other restaurants, it really is starting to seem like Grand Central around here.

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