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FOOD & DRINK - RESTAURANT REVIEWS

July 02, 2013



Italian for dinner

Channelside's Cena is home to impeccable and authentic Italian.

by JON PALMER CLARIDGE

Grand Central at Channelside is really coming into its own. Last year I reported on its charming courtyard adjacent to Stageworks Theatre. Now, it's not only added the fabulous Le Mouton Noir bakery around the corner, but also replaced its weak gastronomic link with the surprising Cena (Italian for dinner), the best new restaurant in town. Even more surprising are the modernist desserts, which are as visually striking and tasty as any sweets around the Bay.

Like its intimate sleek dining room, the menu is narrow, but boy, does it pack a punch. Chef Michael Buttacavoli delivers on Cena's promise to be "modern, fresh, and simple." Having recently dined at another noted Italian landmark, I am struck that Cena has much better food at nearly half the price.

Not only that, they make it easy to begin with bubbles — always a great way to start a meal. Cena offers ample pours of both a French Blanc de Blanc brut (100 percent chardonnay) and an Italian sparkling rosé at only five bucks a glass. This is a bargain not to be missed.

The appetizers are straightforward, but the flavors are terrific. The frittata of Italian bacon and eggs, plus small chunks of savory potato, is overflowing with taste. It's balanced with the acidity of tomato vinaigrette that cleanses your palate and keeps you coming back for more. But the star of the dish is a cluster of delightful pork belly slices. They're thinner than the fat slabs you usually see, more like extra thick bacon, but perfectly caramelized and just flat out luscious.

This is not the only winner on the appetizer menu. The tuna crudo is impeccably fresh, a glistening dark red, and accompanied by delectable creamy truffled white bean purée with artichokes and mortadella, that most wonderful of Italian sausages from Bologna.

Also noteworthy is the beef Carpaccio. The surprise here is that rather than being served flat in thin, overlapping slices, the rare beef is rolled around scrumptious sweet fig jam and served upright, sushi style. Peppery arugula, nutty Parmigiano Reggiano and a tart syrupy aged balsamic complete the dish. The flavors bounce around your mouth as though the chef were a pinball wizard.

The entrees do not disappoint, either. Juicy white branzini fillets with crisp brown skin crisscross over a base of slightly bitter escarole tempered by white beans. A

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CHIP WEINER

WAY BEYOND BACON AND EGGS: Cena's frittata is topped with luscious slices of pork belly.



Cena

Grand Central at Channelside, 1120 E. Kennedy Blvd., Tampa, 813-374-8849, cena-channelside.com. Appetizers \$4-\$14, entrees \$9-\$28, desserts \$4-\$9, wines by the glass \$5-\$12.

4.00000 out of 5

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sauce of lemon, garlic, and herbs is just the elixir to heighten all the flavors.

Lamb ragu plops a huge braised falling-off-the-bone lamb shank on comforting cheesy Asiago polenta decorated with braised fennel and artichokes. This is Italian comfort food par excellence.

Braised oxtail ragu is an umami-filled miracle. The sauce has so much sweet meaty flavor that you almost forget just how scrumptious the lovely gnocchi are. They simultaneously deliver soft potato flavor with the contrasting crunch that comes from the caramelized, brown pan sear. It's everything an oxtail aficionado could wish. If you've been a victim of soggy, bland gnocchi and wondered what the fuss was all about, you owe it to yourself to revel in Cena's enchanting version.

Just when you're thinking that the food is too good to be true, pastry wizard Evan Schmidt throws his head back, let's fly a hearty laugh and knocks you on your culinary ass. Cena's savory menu is first rate, but the desserts are out of this world.

The *bococcini con crema* features huge caramel-crusted cream puffs stuffed with pistachio cream dotted with diced limoncello-macerated strawberries. The puffs are connected by thin chocolate rectangles so they resemble a starship navigating deep space, while avoiding the housemade almond macaroon asteroids and a moon of mascarpone marshmallow fluff.

The *zuppa inglese* is a mouth-watering modern take on traditional Italian trifle served in a huge balloon wine glass. Light chunks of sponge cake combine with roasted pine nuts, marinated fruit compote and whipped vanilla yogurt all swirled together, but wonderfully balanced and dotted with tiny lavender flowers. It's both beautiful and delicious.

When the server recommends the tiramisu, you're just not prepared for what's to come. Cena delivers a deconstructed version of this ubiquitous dessert favorite. It arrives at the table looking like a huge ostrich egg nesting in espresso and chocolate gravel, decorated by two long chocolate spears. The "egg" is a Mascarpone mousse filled with espresso soaked ladyfingers. Fortunately, it's not a gimmick; every element is expertly executed. It's truly a tiramisu for the avant-garde.

Summer is the perfect time to enjoy a pre-theater meal in the Channelside courtyard. If you wish to find out, as I do, How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents, head over to Stageworks and enjoy a early meal at Cena. As Hamlet says, "'Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished."

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