

Culinary treasures from an Italian grandmother

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Isola Pizza Bar

1526 India St. (Little Italy)

619-255-4230

Prices: Appetizers and salads, \$6.75 to \$15; pizzas, \$10 to \$16

By Frank Sabatini Jr. | Restaurant review

Massimo Tenino originally wanted to become a dentist, but decided that he'd rather excite our choppers than fix them. In doing so, he opened Isola Pizza Bar in Little Italy, which pays tribute to the recipes of his late grandmother, Isola, who created pizzas better than Paula Deen bangs out cheesy grits.

After immigrating to the United States from Italy, the aspiring restaurateur first established an Italian kitchen in Arizona, which he still maintains. At

Isola, the main event is pizza topped with fresh ingredients that are delivered to the restaurant daily, even on Sundays. The pies then undergo rapid cooking in a wood-fire oven imported from Naples, taking less than three minutes to cook before hitting your table.

While we can safely assume that Grandma Isola used a deft hand at making lasagna and ravioli, pasta is completely missing from the menu in an effort to keep the concept simple. Preludes include things like charred octopus, assorted salumi and a deliciously rustic salad of roasted vegetables served with goat cheese, a fat head of baked garlic and emulsified anchovy oil on the side. Fear not, it isn't fishy.



Red sauce and sausage pizza (Photo by Frank Sabatini Jr.)

A starter of cannelloni beans mashed with garlic, herbs and red chilies tasted plainer than expected, with only bursts of sea salt springing forth. The shrimp alla diavola that followed, however, was exceptional as all eight of the crustaceans soaked in a bath of white wine, capers and bits of tomatoes that bestowed a crimson color to the drinkable liquid. Served atop a couple of juice-soaking polenta cakes, the garlic and chili flakes in this case were given a platform.

Oak logs stacked within a wall unit are used for fueling the oven and add a countrified aesthetic to an otherwise clean, industrial design. Marble, steel and modern light fixtures flow throughout, leading to a quaint back patio festooned in green plastic vines. Stretching across a middle wall of the restaurant is a giant photograph of Sophia Loren that seamlessly incorporates doors to the restrooms.

Isola's pizza making adheres to Neapolitan standards, which means that double-zero flour is used for constructing the dough. The designation refers to a maximum powdery grind, resulting in an airier crust that easily snaps apart from a twitch of the finger. There are more than a dozen pizza choices, ranging from white anchovies with tomato, olives and oregano to one topped with pork cheeks and fennel pollen.

Visiting as a twosome, we ordered a pie with red sauce and another without. The sauceless pizza featured taleggio cheese, my favorite Italian curd that loses its stinky odor upon melting. Paper-thin red potatoes covered the top, along with small measures of mozzarella, shiitake mushrooms and fresh rosemary. As far as "white" pizzas go, we gave it an A-plus rating.

The saliccia pizza features bright-red sauce that carried the essence of sweet, vine-ripe tomatoes. Red onions, mushrooms and mozzarella came into play along with homemade sausage that was rich in fennel, although a tad too salty. But a good flavor balance was achieved among the fresh organics, some of which we witnessed being delivered to the kitchen beforehand by a purveyor.

Other topping combos hailing from *nonna* Isola's recipe box include white anchovies with olives, garlic and oregano; broccoli raab with sausage and ricotta; and a luxuriant union of pancetta, mozzarella and shaved Parmesan finished off with truffle oil and a farm egg.

Isola's wine list is a playground for fans of Italian varieties that include lambrusco, soave, sangiovese and nebbiolo. My companion chose a bright chardonnay from Italy's Abruzzi province, which I seldom see represented in other San Diego establishments. As predicted, its gentle acidity paired ideally to our shrimp appetizer and taleggio pizza.

Tiramisu and gelatos are made in-house, although for something different we concluded with homemade chocolate pudding speckled judiciously with sea salt and layered with caramel sauce and heavy cream. In the absence of pasta, we guiltlessly washed down the silky carbs with sturdy cappuccino while adding Isola to our ever-growing list of favorite Italian restaurants.
