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SURFACE

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LEGENDS AT WORK





Earthy colors and old-world charm bring comfort to diners at this Italian eatery in Mexico City.

BY ALLIE WEISS

La Nonna Cucina Bar, the second restaurant Héctor Esrawe has designed in Mexico City’s Polanco neighborhood, operates out of a 70-year-old mansion it shares with three other eateries. As locals from the area have moved into more affordable housing elsewhere in recent decades, many of the area’s large homes have transformed into retail and restaurant spaces. Esrawe has watched the neighborhood grow into a major dining and shopping destination, and he notes that many establishments have adopted a common look. “You see many of the neighbors have a Ralph Lauren–store style,” he says. “They’re all playing the same game.”

With La Nonna, Esrawe wanted to create an “honest” space that can “breathe,” as he puts it—aiming to capture a timeless aesthetic instead of chasing the latest trends. The building is catalogued as a historic house in the city, so his design studio had to keep the space’s architectural bones intact. The restaurant’s name, which includes the Italian word for grandmother, nonna, emphasizes that the

values of tradition and family are present in its design. Hanging from a vaulted ceiling is the centerpiece of the 3,200-square-foot space, a custom chandelier made of 1,500 brass spoons. “We decided to create an homage to the grandma’s relationship with the kitchen,” Esrawe says. “If you find traditional pictures of the Italian nonna, you will always find her with a spoon in her hand.”

The rest of the space features simple materials and neutral colors, a palette influenced by the Mediterranean style of architect Carlo Scarpa. For the floors, the firm chose oak boards, and it covered the aging walls with light casted bricks. “All the furniture is inspired by some of the traditional tools for working with pasta,” Esrawe says. The oak chairs, for example, subtly reference rolling pins. Following Esrawe’s notion of design integrity, the entire dining room is visible from the entrance. “As soon as you see the [front] terrace, you can read the whole depth of the place,” he says.

The airy restaurant looks nothing like Esrawe’s last interior in the neighborhood: Tori Tori, a three-story Japanese restaurant wrapped in a latticelike steel encasement that architect Michel Rojkind designed in 2011. “There’s no project that looks the same,” Esrawe says of his work. “I’m not interested in having a style.”

La Nonna Cucina Bar features oak chairs and a chandelier made of spoons.

PHOTO: JAIME NAVARRO.



Dish by Seamus Mullen

INSPIRED BY LA NONNA CUCINA BAR

Risotto Nero of Acquerello rice, squid, guanciale, sea urchin, avocado, and cauliflower

I don’t have an Italian grandmother. If I were an upstart Italian-American chef, I would no doubt wax poetic about my nonna’s meatballs or her ravioli or her sauce, but, alas, I can’t do that. And while my grandmothers Mutti and Meme were exceptional cooks who wielded tremendous influence over my career and my cooking, I’d be lying if I said this dish was plucked from either of their repertoires. I know both my grandmothers loved seafood; in fact, I recall being in Gascony with Mutti and eating fresh sea urchin from the shell with hunks of crusty bread and smears of perfect French butter. And they both loved rice: Meme prepared the very first paella and risotto I ever had, both nearly 30 years ago.

In some way, this dish is my nonnas’ cucina, as hard as it might be to recognize my grandmothers’ hands in it. The dining room of La Nonna Cucina doesn’t hark back to the kitchen of an old Italian grandmother, no matter how much dried oregano and braided garlic you might try to hang from the rafters. It does, however, integrate the clean lines that have made Italy famous for over a century. To an outsider, Italy has always seemed to have one foot firmly rooted in the old ways and the other in the vanguard. I felt a dish that paid tribute to tradition and added a few somewhat unconventional bits and bobs was appropriate. Since the restaurant is in Mexico, an avocado seemed like just the thing to bring it all together. Buon Appetito!

Serves Four

For the risotto

- 2 cups Acquerello rice (substitute with carnaroli or arborio if unavailable)
- 6 cups squid stock
- ¼ pound fresh squid, cut into thin rings
- ¼ pound guanciale, diced
- 1 fennel bulb, diced, fronds reserved
- 1 shallot, minced
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 dried guindilla or other hot dried peppers
- 1 teaspoon champagne vinegar
- 2 tablespoons dry white wine
- 2 tablespoons squid ink
- 4 tablespoons unsalted, excellent-quality butter

For the garnish

- 4 lobes fresh sea urchin (uni)
- 1 cup raw cauliflower, shaved paper thin on a mandoline
- 1 avocado, cut into small triangles
- ≈ fresh grated horseradish
- ≈ zest and juice of 1 lemon
- ≈ fennel fronds

For the squid stock

- 2 pounds cleaned, frozen squid
- 1 onion, thinly sliced
- 2 cloves garlic
- 1 carrot
- 2 bulbs fennel, diced
- 2 bay leaves
- 1 cup white wine

Process

To make the squid stock, sweat the onions, garlic, carrot, and two diced fennel bulbs in four tablespoons of olive oil in a large stockpot, then deglaze with wine. Allow the alcohol to cook off, add 2 pounds of squid, and cover with 6 liters of water. Add bay leaves, bring to a boil, and reduce to a simmer. Simmer uncovered for three hours, then carefully strain, discarding the solids.

In a large wide pot, heat olive oil over high heat and sauté the quarter-pound of fresh squid rings for one minute, then remove the squid from the pot and set aside. Add the guanciale to the pot, reduce the heat to medium high, and sauté until it begins to brown.

Add the fennel and shallot and continue to cook for one minute, then add the garlic, dried guindilla, and the rice. Toast the rice using a rubber spatula, moving it constantly to ensure none of the ingredients burn. Once the rice has begun to turn transparent—about one minute—deglaze with the champagne vinegar, wait 30 seconds, and deglaze a second time with the white wine. Allow the alcohol to cook off for 45 seconds, then add the squid ink and stir until thoroughly incorporated.

Begin adding the stock, a few ounces at a time. The secret is to only add as much as the rice can absorb in two minutes before adding more, stirring the rice in a clockwise direction the whole time. The idea is to gently emulsify the stock with the starch of the rice. Season cautiously with salt and liberally with pepper. As the rice cooks, it will naturally take on the salt of the stock, guanciale, and squid ink. Continue in this way until the stock is fully absorbed. Taste as you go; the rice should have a slight toothiness to it, but no pasty starchiness inside the grain. It should take about 19–21 minutes of cooking.

Remove from the heat and fold in the butter (cold) 1 tablespoon at a time. Once the butter is fully incorporated, fold the sautéed squid back into the rice and distribute into four warm bowls.

PHOTO: DISH, LESLEY UNRUH.