



Grandma's House: Casa Nonna

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They look like tourists mostly, directed by alert concierges in nearby hotels. In just eight days, **Casa Nonna** is starting to fill up, not a snap given the sprawling 15,000 sq.ft. (Its prototype in Washington, DC is 20,000 sq.ft.) The kitchen that was all afumble one week ago is definitely starting to hit stride. Last week's wimpy bucatini all' amatriciana is now rigorously sauced, the twigs of pancetta piled on top adding bacony chew and flavor. Most of us are carefully avoiding rings of fiery red pepper scattered along with toasted bread crumbs over the bigoli with cockles in the shell and crumbled sausage, but not me. I like biting into a ringlet, testing the burn and going for it. I'm not letting my friends order pappardelle al funghi because even with little blobs of ricotta it was so bland and over-oiled a week earlier. Now I'll never know if it might be as skillfully done tonight as the garlicky potato gnocchi with plump chunks of lobster, chanterelles, pancetta and clippings of garlic greens. We were all by ourselves in one of two empty dining rooms that first night, staring at a wall of boldly eclectic - shall I say - Art? "Bought by the yard," I speculated. Not as amusing as the ceramic rain boots under some tables - mustn't get Grandma's floor wet. It takes a lot of big red Lavazza cookie tins and standup plates to fill in the empty space above tufted banquettes.

Even with no one in the house, someone had decided to cut the bread too early. The one triumph of that evening was a pizza diavolo with discs of garlicky pepperoni, a miracle of crispness, unlike the classic soggy Neapolitan pie it claims to be. By the way, unless you park yourself at the pizza counter, staring into the mosaic pizza oven, you need to ask for a pizza menu. A week has made a big difference. Not on that wall, but in filling seats and plates. Tonight's pies - the Emilia with fennel sausage and broccoli rabe, and Nonna's with zucchini flowers, pesto and a fried egg - are not quite as elegantly crisp, but almost as good. Even the Road Food Warrior, who sneers at broccoli rabe and eggs corrupting his pizza, agrees. Too bad the server isn't smart enough to alert the pizza cook we are five before he quarters the pie. We'd filled up that first night on small grilled spiedini of speck-wrapped fontina, lumpen arrancini of saffron parmesan risotto, a drowsy Caesar salad, and fried calamari in a chewy batter with chive aioli, then had no room for secondi. But tonight the five of us are sharing an order of veal cheeks. The fatty chunks ride on creamy polenta under a crunchy salad of pigs' ear cracklings, shaved red onion, parsley and fris e. The rivulets of reduced braising juices flowing into the run off of olive oil and lemon is a wake up call in my mouth. Yet the poletto alla diavola holds its own - even the white meat is moist. The tangy bird tastes of lemon, garlic and caramelized hot pepper flakes. The devilish butter spread on top and on grilled country bread mingles with the bird's own juices, soaking the arugula, a heady tingle.

A rush to judgment can be dangerous. After 42 years reviewing restaurants, it's no surprise that it can take months, even a year, before a restaurant fits into its bones, longer for brilliance. On the other hand, a chef can launch in a frenetic dazzle, cooking brilliantly when the place is sparsely populated, then stumble when crowds jam in. Executive chef Amy Brandwein spends hours on Amtrak between DC and our town, overseeing the menu with chef de cuisine David Amorelli, who once ran the kitchen at Alan Stillman's midtown brasserie Cit  and later worked with Laurent Tourondel and David Burke. Brandwein's Italian dessert classics are dramatized by executive pastry chef Julie Elkind who doubles here and at BLT Steak. Her affogato adds bitter amaro to the espresso that gets poured atop white chocolate gelato. That's a twist or two I didn't try because I hoped to sleep later. The torrone semi freddo starts with Italian nougat and almond sponge. Warm chocolate is then poured on top, forming a shell. I especially love the fragility and tartness of her cr me fra che panna cotta with fleur de sel, vin cotto and tendrils of fresh plum.

You might wonder who will fill the back room and what private parties will take over the empty party room all set up with silver and glasses for a banquet yet to come. Is anyone dropping by for a quick fix in the **Go Burger Kiosk** up front in this strange factory block of 38th Street west of Ninth Avenue? So far I haven't spied a burger fan. But clearly the powers that built ESquared Hospitality, BLT Restaurant Group's new parent company, have taken stock of the new hotels not far away and residences newly ridden nearby. Indeed, the back room was full last week when the place hosted concierges for dinner. See what I mean?