

LASPLASH.COM: Chicago Feature of the Week Food

## Gaetano's Review – A Chicago Restaurant You Should Know

By Jackie Bookman



Inside Gaetano's

Given a wonderful recommendation for **Gaetano's**, the Chicago Splash Magazine team of Jackie, Steve, Sandy and Barbara headed to Forest Park to explore further. When Chef/owner, Gaetano De Benedetto, well-loved, longtime owner of La Piazza, moved down the street to smaller quarters, he envisioned his new restaurant to be like his own living room, one that was warm and where he could greet his guests with ease. He has completely succeeded encasing the wood-burning oven within an open bar from which the entire room can be seen. We found the space was cozy, like a room in a house, and noted both the dishes and the space were designed to pleasantly surprise the guests. The motif is even carried through to the bathroom, where jugs, from small to large, are combined in Rube Goldberg style to deliver the water. People who used the washroom came out smiling, eager to tell their dinner companions about the experience. The other diners, would, at some point, slip off to experience it themselves.



Gaetano and Annamarie

Likewise, the menu, with its wide range of dishes (which changes frequently), came close to overwhelming us with the number of choices. Everything sounded wonderful, and unique in preparation and presentation. We had the Chef's Choice and two of our group had the wine pairing also. As dish after dish was presented to us, we were amazed at the quality of each, and even more amazed at the number of delicious-sounding dishes remaining on the menu tempting us for a return visit. The food presentation too, conveys a sense of wonder and enchantment.



Calamari

Though the restaurant, at its core, is solidly Italian, Gaetano uses elements and motifs from other cuisines, particularly Japanese and Mexican. The Calamari, for example, was tempura-fried, and topped with spicy-shrimp sauce, borlotti bean aioli and soy-lime citronette, and came wrapped as if it was sushi. Light as butter, the Calamari delighted, and the asian-inspired flavors added spice, though did not overwhelm the delicate texture and flavor of the Calamari. Jackie, who normally does not like Calamari, often finding it rubbery, loved this dish.



Carpaccio di barbabietole

Many of the dishes, such as the Carpaccio di barbabietole, yellow and red beets roasted in the wood-burning oven, sliced carpaccio style and drizzled with champagne vinaigrette, served with goat cheese, have some or all ingredients prepared in the wood-burning oven. These dishes had a wonderful, smoky flavor, yet were always balanced by other ingredients, so the wood-burning preparation never overpowered the dishes. Steve particularly loved the beets, and had seconds, though he normally doesn't eat beets.



Tortino di patate e zucca con ragiyt di funghi

The Tortino di patate e zucca con ragout di funghi was also a standout. This was like a torta, made with potatoes and butternut squash, layered with caramelized onion and marscarpone royal, baked and served with mushroom ragout. Sandy, especially, loved this dish and raved about it through the meal. We proclaimed it "the ultimate comfort food" for its creaminess, texture and flavor. Rich, but not overwhelming, this is the dish we would most want, and lots of it, on a cold, rainy day.



Carpaccio d'anatra con mozzarella di bufala

Our flat-out favorites, which everyone said they would gladly order again, were: Carpaccio d'anatra con mozzarella di bufala, an amazing mixture of duck breast roasted and sliced carpaccio style, layered with bufala mozzarella and basil, drizzled with E.V.O. Oil, and marinated wild mushrooms. The buffalo mozzarella was fresh, and we kept taking bite after bite trying to identify the seasonings used in the mushrooms and duck.



Halibut all'olio con mango e mousse d'avocado

Our number one favorite (if possible, given the enormous quantity and variety of choices) was the Halibut all'olio con mango e mousse d'avocado. We all found the olive oil poached halibut light and buttery, and would definitely order it on a return visit. Steve said he would have thought it was Chilean sea bass. The sauces, as always, complimented but did not overwhelm the dish, and had a slightly Mexican influence, which, like the Calamari, was a delightful surprise.



Risotto ai funghi

The Risotto ai funghi--Risotto with assorted mushrooms and demi-glace, finished with Parmesan and truffle pesto was another favorite. Rich and creamy, the risotto was another comfort food. The mushroom and truffle pesto added a wonderful woody flavor; we kept eating in an attempt to figure out exactly what it was. We were close to full by the time this dish came, but couldn't stop eating. We all agreed this would definitely be an order on a return visit.

The pasta was a variation of one of the dishes on the menu: Orecchiette con carciofi, macco, cicoria e Filetto, di manzo--orecchiette tossed with 4 oz beef tenderloin, sauteed artichokes, chicory, and macco with carrettiera sauce. This dish was terrific, garlicky and mildly spicy and perfectly al dente.



Fiore di zucca al drago

Steve loved the Foie gras con frutti di bosco e balsamico, foie-gras pan seared with assorted berries with 25 year-old balsmic vinegar and preserved artichokes. He liked the mix of flavors: the rich foie gras paired with the slightly sweet berries. Jackie loved the Fiore di zucca al drago--zucchini blossoms with pecorino cheese

mousse, served tempura style with drago sauce--and found that the zucchini blossoms dipped in the sauce for the foie gras was especially flavorful.



The 'magic' wood burning oven

Game lovers would love the Cinghiale con Chianti alla Maremmana--Wild Boar marinated in Chianti wine with mirepoix and herbs, accented with juniper berries, stewed overnight and served with polenta. This was another dish where the richness of the boar was balanced with the sweetness of the juniper and mirepoix, and the lightness of the polenta. This tasted especially good when paired with a cabbage torte made especially for our table.



Costine di maiale

The Costine di maiale--baby back ribs poached in orange water, glazed with honey-habanera served over lentils was sweet-hot, and we liked the lentils with bread. The Rollino di patate con asparagi e confit d'anatra-- duck confit wrapped in potatoes with asparagus, goat cheese and black truffle pesto; then baked and drizzled with aged balsamic and white wine sauce was another fun (and delicious) surprise. At first it looked like sushi, but the potato shell was light and the duck paired well with the goat cheese and black truffle pesto.



Gaspacho di cantalupo e melone verde con crema di formaggio e fragole

The desert Gazpacho was another wonderful surprise, Gaspacho di cantalupo e melone verde con crema di formaggio e fragole-- Cantaloupe and honeydew gazpacho served with passion fruit cheesecake mousse and strawberry was light yet textured. The cantaloupe and honeydew flavors came through well, and a bite of this mixed with the mousse gave it an amazing texture and flavor. It is really light, wonderful, outstanding. We all thought it was perfect after a heavy meal. Steve thought it was nicer than a sorbet, and Sandy thought it fools you into thinking you are not so full. Barbara thought the little bit of texture enhanced the flavor giving it zest. Sharing the plate was the flourless chocolate cake with gianduia semifreddo and raspberry coulis that was loved by all, and everyone agreed they would order it again.

We enjoyed talking with Karen and her husband seated near us who were fans of La Piazza. They commented that the food at **Gaetano's** retains the quality, freshness, flavor and inventiveness they came to expect. They appreciated (as we did) the Chef's flexibility in accommodating the restrictions of lactose intolerance, vegetarian and gluten-free.



Angela, Jennifer, Elena

Reflecting on our experience, we found it very homey and cozy and loved the wonderful garlic smell. We were impressed by the accommodation to different dietary restrictions. We were delighted with the surprises offered by both the interior and the dishes. We enjoyed the homey atmosphere, where diners were comfortable talking with each other. The menu is very extensive, but care is taken with all the dishes, and we enjoyed everything

we were served. Meal goes from light to heavy, as do the wine pairings. The wine served on the pairing menu was well matched to the dishes. The red and dessert wine were Steve's favorites. The cappuccino looked so good that everyone ended up ordering it with desert. The wait staff is especially attentive, aware, sensitive but never hovering or invasive. We hope to return soon because as Sandy said, "I think he's got a winner here".

**Gaetanos** is located at 7636 W. Madison St., Forest Park, IL 60130  
Call: 708-366-4010, Fax 708-366-4161 or go to: <http://www.gaetanos.us/>  
Lunch Hours: Tuesday - Friday 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.  
Dinner Hours: Tuesday - Thursday 5:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m.  
Friday - Saturday 4:30 p.m. to 10:30 p.m.  
Closed Sunday & Monday

Addendum: Cooking classes are offered once a month, in which Chef Gaetano teaches valuable techniques students can use to create wonderful food at home based on his experience. Classes are scheduled the last Saturday of each month from 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. and are limited in size and cost \$60 per session with three classes dropping the charge to \$50 per session including tastings, wine and beverages. Call 708-366-4010. Cooking Class Gift Certificates make a great Gift!

June 28th – Fish – One Fish, Two Fish more Fish, fresh and simple preparations.

July 26th - Hot Weather Food – Fabulous cool dishes to enjoy on those hot days of summer.

August 30th - Vegetarian – Learn creative, delicious vegetarian dishes!

September 27th – Side Dishes – Need ideas on what to serve with your main course?

October 25th - Risotto – Step out of the cold and into a warm bowl of risotto.

Photos: Barbara Keer

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