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Restaurant review: Nel Centro tasty, yet slim on soul

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David Machado

David Machado, the impresario of **Nel Centro**, a new restaurant and bar nestled in the chic Hotel Modera downtown, is without question a splendid restaurateur. A long-time chef, he has settled into the role of what the French call *chef d'entreprise*, the "chef" in this instance meaning "chief," not the man working the stove. As a result his staffs are always well-trained, attentive and informative, and his restaurants operate with informal professionalism. At his new venture he has hired superb people in the kitchen: Paul Hyman as chef de cuisine and Lee Posey as pastry chef.

Machado has always explored a distinct tradition in each of his Portland restaurants: Italian at Pazzo, Portuguese at Lauro Kitchen, "spice route" cuisine (mostly Indian) at Vindalho. His latest undertaking announces itself as French and Italian Riviera cooking. The abiding question is whether Machado's shape-shifting among diverse traditions is a mark of global virtuosity, vogueishness, derring-do or culinary restlessness.

There are times when Nel Centro seems seriously invested in the diverse cuisine that stretches 125 miles

along the Ligurian littoral, from Nice to Genoa, and there are times when it's not clear exactly what roots anchor this restaurant deep in the Mediterranean soil and its waters.

The great food writer Joseph Wechsberg said, "You can export all the ingredients, but you cannot seal in a can the shining of the sun or the blue of the sky and the sea, and pour it into a saucepan." To be sure, Nel Centro doesn't cook from cans, but the kitchen, however indisputably good some of its recipes are, seems at times to aim as much for very broad appeal as for authenticity, resulting in dishes without the terroir or the soul of the Med. Panzanella, or bread salad, accompanying rather mundane roast chicken consists of croutons, tasteless tomatoes and a few pieces of arugula, rather than an external "stuffing" of torn, chewy peasant bread and a savory vinaigrette with chicken drippings.

Nel Centro, somewhat like Lauro Kitchen, tends to pull back from a full concentration on the ethnic fare it showcases. While there are a number of classic Riviera dishes, some beautifully done, others merely quote an ingredient or two, while still others are less representative of the region than generic French (potato gratin) or Italian (pasta with lamb meatballs).

The best dish I tried is beef daube, its dark winey sauce with olives and tomatoes giving a southern turn to the stew. The meat is tender, the sauce intensely flavorful and evocative of the region. Another fine dish is burrida, a seafood stew similar to San Francisco's cioppino but much more dense -- closer to a Provençal fish stew called bourride. Mussels and octopus chunk this tasty ragout, Genoa's answer to Marseilles' bouillabaisse.

One fine choice to begin a meal is a tangy salad of almost translucent zucchini, which resemble delicate ribbons. Sprinkled with pecorino cheese and mint, it's a refreshing way to employ this abundant vegetable. Spanking-fresh pink slices of shining tuna carpaccio dashed with lemon, and baked pasta with ricotta, olives, capers and tomatoes -- bubbly, pungent, alive with southern savors -- are handsome starters.

But sometimes the regional ebullience is lacking.

Pansotti, a triangular-shaped pasta traditionally bathed in walnut sauce, is a great idea, but Nel Centro's was over-salted, the sauce inexcusably gloppy, the dough heavy. Baked oysters with fennel and Pernod were dry from excessive bread crumbs, masking the brininess. Mussels are hardly foreign to the Mediterranean, but when Nel Centro adds potato chips to them it turns the dish into a play on moules frites, the national dish of Belgium -- and as far from Nice as can be.

Some native side dishes are fine: ratatouille, tapenade and a relish of green olives. But I wish the restaurant would go all-out with greater daring and deliver more powerful, pungent flavors that breathe the soul of this vibrant cuisine.

Pastry chef Posey's desserts are terrific. Basil ice cream is an herbaceous eye-opener, her blueberry and fig gratin (something like a crumble) a perfect late-summer/early-fall finisher and the chocolate soufflé is wonderfully molten. Only lemon semifreddo was ordinary.

The inside spaces at Nel Centro are pleasant, though somewhat hotel generic, with comfortable booths seemingly designed for separation rather than for festivity and conviviality, which seems inappropriate to the gutsy food of the Mediterranean. As long as the weather is dry, the charming courtyard with its devilish fireboxes is the place to be.

If you exclude the Monaco-Cannes jet set, this region, especially Italian Liguria from the sea to the soil of its backcountry and mountains, emphasizes a very casual lifestyle and a cuisine deeply impressed by a rural, peasant culture. While you can have a satisfying meal at Nel Centro, I hope it will give us more evidence of the region's characteristic style: pissaladi re (Nicoise pizza), socca (chickpea flour crepes), fresh anchovies, chestnuts, a range of pesto preparations, more indigenous desserts. In short, I'd like to see fewer dishes that could come from anywhere, and greater allegiance to native grounds.

Roger Porter is a Portland freelance writer; porter@reed.edu

Summing up:

Grade: B

Cuisine and scene: An interior that's a bit generic hotel in tone, plus a lovely outdoor courtyard. Touches of Italian and French Riviera cooking.

Recommended: Shaved zucchini and pecorino salad, tuna carpaccio, baked al ceppo, beef daube, Ligurian burrida, chocolate soufflé, basil ice cream

Vegetarian friendly? A number of dishes across the menu.

Sound level: There's not much sound at all.

Beverages: Full bar; well-chosen Italian and French bottles, many from interesting small producers, and a well-annotated wine list.

Price range: Starters \$8-\$13, entrees \$18-\$24, desserts \$6-\$8

Extras: Reservations; credit cards; street parking and hotel parking at Southwest Fifth and Clay; disabled access

Serving: Breakfast Mon.-Sat., lunch Mon.-Fri., brunch Sun., dinner nightly

Info: 1408 S.W. Sixth Ave.; 503-484-1099; www.nelcentro.com

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