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Glammed-up La Spiga keeps its core goodness

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By REBEKAH DENN
P-I RESTAURANT CRITIC

Where did La Spiga go?

In physical form, the home of Seattle's best gnocchi is less than a quarter-mile from its original location near Capitol Hill. In size and style and ambition, though, it's a world away.

The Italian restaurant specializing in the Emilia-Romagna region is a flagship tenant in the redeveloped neighborhood around 12th and Madison. The old automotive shop it calls home has been transformed into a 6,000-square-foot symphony of wood that still spotlights some industrial notes of steel and iron. Take in grand old timbers rooted in newly poured concrete, soaring, barnlike old ceilings graced by a mix of modern lights, and a well-worn floor buffed to attractive tones. For polish, the place has gone big time, featuring a private upstairs dining area, a cocktail list and a long bar formed from a single length of walnut.

We're nostalgic for the sweet Spiga we first stumbled across days after it opened in an easy-to-miss storefront by the Harvard Market QFC. The little place specialized in sandwiches on a soft flatbread called piadina, as well as gloriously basic, perfectly dressed salads and a few handmade pastas. It took only a few visits for us to become regulars, greeted with wholehearted kindness by the trio who made the food by hand and invested great dedication in manning the place: sisters Sabrina and Sachia Tinsley, and Sabrina's husband, Pietro Borghesi. It didn't take long, though, before word got out. Even as the menu was modified and we needed reservations to snag a seat, the quality of the little place stayed strong.

There's less hominess at the new location, though it's far lovelier and has its own feel of warmth. We think it's struggling, at least in these opening weeks, to provide smooth service and maintain consistent quality on it hugely expanded new scale. Still, the quality of its food is remarkable overall. When we sat down to parse each dinner we ate off Spiga's big new menu, we were surprised to realize that we had marked a why-bother or "that didn't work" dish at every meal. The memory of those details had been overpowered by the subliminal character of what we did enjoy, and the strength of its straightforward, affordable, the-way-to-our-hearts-is-through-our-stomachs nature.

La Spiga, where Sabrina still

RESTAURANT REVIEW

OSTERIA LA SPIGA

PHONE: 206-323-8881

ADDRESS: 1429 12th Ave.

WEB SITE: laspiga.com

PRICES: Appetizers $6-$12, pastas and meats $11-$22

HOURS: 5-11 p.m. daily, bar open till 1:30 a.m.

BAR: Full bar, cocktails, extensive list of Italian wines by the bottle (only a handful by the glass)

RESERVATIONS: Strongly recommended

PAYMENT: Visa, MasterCard, AmEx accepted; personal checks OK

SOUND: Can get noisy when

serves as executive chef, has confidence in its simplicity, serving up the same sort of easy-if-you-only-knew-how fare that we marvel at when the Friend from Trieste cooks at home. Pastas are expertly formed -- there's a viewing area where one can observe their creation before returning to one's seat to rave over the final products. In one form, veil-thin sheets sandwich the lightest béchamel and most unadulterated ragu, forming a dish so light and satisfying we hardly recognized it as lasagna. Pillow-shaped potato gnocchi, every bite cloud-light and cut so evenly it could have been cloned rather than sliced by hand, wear thin coats of plain tomato sauce. Ribbons of tagliatelle are lightly coated in bolognese, not as rich or meaty as some, but deeply satisfying nonetheless.

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When cooked, this handmade gnocchi at Osteria La Spiga becomes cloud-light in a thin coat of plain tomato sauce.

Some of the pastas and starches, though, suffered dramatically between birth and bowl. It's not too strong to say that squash-stuffed tortelli ($13) were ruined by a burst of sickly sweet, unannounced almond flavor in the filling, while a rustic-sounding tangle of tagliatelle, sausage and chickpeas came off as gummy and strangely bland. Duck risotto ($15), while cooked to order and achieving a perfect texture, tasted only and intensely of cheese.

The menu retains some of Spiga's old favorites while stretching into new territory. For starters, grilled tortelli stuffed with potato puree and topped by salty, thin-sliced meats ($12) was a rustic treat, while the Friend from Trieste loved the authenticity of paper-thin eggplant slices in a sharp parsley-based sauce ($7). The broth accompanying the passatelli dumplings may boast Wagyu beef and free-range chicken ($10), but to us the dish spoke of the simple goodness of home cooking.

Grilled Toma cheese wrapped in grape leaves, though, arrived too cool and congealed ($9), while one of the few piadinas ($10) still on the menu, filled with shards of roast boar, was dry. For other entrees and sides, pebbly sausage and polenta ($12) made as hearty a dinner as gently braised boar ribs ($16) made a warming one, but beef tenderloin ($22) in truffle oil was merely soft and safe and inoffensive. Braised greens ($5) were overcooked, though a

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A satisfying lasagna is made with veil-thin sheets of noodle that encase a light béchamel

crowded, acoustics better at some tables than others

ACCESS: Stairs down to bathroom, but elevator available

PARKING: Difficult street parking

KID-FRIENDLY: No amenities offered

BEST BETS: Melanzane (eggplant) della Zia Irene $7; Tortelli alla Lastra con Affettati della Casa $12; Gnocchi al Pomodoro $11; Lasagne Verdi $12;

Passatelli $10; house salad $5 (small)

RATINGS:

Food: ***

Service: *

Ambience: ***

Ratings guide (full explanation)
**** extraordinary
*** excellent
** good
* fair

molded heap of butternut squash cubes ($6), roasted with onions and cocoa, came off so natural and sweet it could have served as a savory dessert.

and pure ragu.

Spiga's house salad is as clean-tasting a home run as ever, brightened with a little salt, enriched by good olive oil. (Speaking of olive oil, though, ignore the what-the-heck olive oils and vinegars now available as "condiment" side orders for $5 to $11. Servers aren't entirely sure what to do with them, they unnecessarily pad the bill and ours, while high-quality, didn't seem well served by their recommended use as a dip for piadina).

Dessert quality was the most variable, even night to night, as with a house-made, intensely flavored gelato ($6) that transported us to our hosts' mother country on one night, then showed up lighter and sweeter and a touch crystalline on the next visit.

The restaurant, barely two months old, is clearly still working out its kinks. A varnish-like odor pervaded the room on one visit. A few dishes, while still printed on the menu, have already been removed. Service needs work. Staffers on one visit, who told us they had come from the old location, were overstretched but well-versed on the food. At our other meals we felt pushed to order drinks (we opted for coffee, which arrived tepid), we were left staring at our neighbors' plates while half the table's courses were delivered and the others delayed, and found "I don't know" (our bane -- we at least like to hear "let me ask!") as the most common answer to even basic questions. We would expect the timing at least to improve as the staffing catches up with the place's popularity. Already, without reservations, you'll be lucky to get a table even on weeknights.

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The main dining room is a symphony of wood with soaring ceilings and modern lights.

Still, there are touches of the old style there. Although we missed Sachia, who is no longer involved in the business end of things, and never spotted Sabrina, we once did see Pietro embracing the old customers who are flocking to visit, even picking up some of the table service himself.

We ate well, we lingered long (the pace is leisurely, whether you prefer it that way or not). Where did La Spiga go? It's dressed up like Cinderella at the ball, more distant in princess form than the girl she used to be, but lovely and still good at heart.

P-I restaurant critic Rebekah Denn is on family leave. Her stand-in, Leslie Kelly, can be reached at 206-448-8154 or lesliekelly@seattlepi.com.

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