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## Restaurant Review

# The new La Spiga is bigger, glossier — and still fantastico!

By Nancy Leson

*Seattle Times restaurant critic*

Four old guys sat sipping red wine at Osteria La Spiga, laughing, gesticulating and chatting in Italian before one of them stood and burst into song. Between sips and song they spooned zuppa and ate piadina, the ubiquitous flatbread of the Romagna region of Northern Italy.

Noticing a woman with a fussy infant, one gent called across the room, imploring, "Bring that bambino over here!" And when she complied, he did what any practiced nonno would do — shoved a slice of bread into the teething baby's mouth.

Many years and a new locale later, that piadina still pacifies those who dine at La Spiga. But when it comes to comparing the original shop — beloved for its piadina and pasta — with the new incarnation, let's just say it's come a long way, bambino.

With nearly 6,000 square feet of restaurant space wrapped around a big-time bar, the new La Spiga is less an osteria than an Oh!-steria. No longer a homey little hangout for nonno and his pals, it now resembles a chic chalet at a hip ski resort — just ditch the slopes and add a warm-weather patio and a view of Seattle's cityscape. Beautiful, comfortable and gone gonzo with good energy, the new digs prove that bigger can actually be better.

**Italian** ★★★ \$\$

**La Spiga**

1429 12th Ave., Seattle

206-323-8881

In 1998, sisters Sabrina and Sachia Tinsley and Sabrina's husband, Pietro Borghesi, introduced Seattle to the simple fare of Emilia-Romagna in the

Harvard Market complex on Capitol Hill. They closed the place last year, and in December (minus Sachia, now pastry chef at Wild



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Chef Sabrina Tinsley and her husband, Pietro Borghesi, have moved and improved their Capitol Hill osteria.



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La Spiga's chic new space — just down the street from the original — has cozy booths, a huge bar, a patio and a view of the city.



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There's tiramisu for dessert — if you have any room after the piadina, the fritto misto di verdure and the house-made pastas.

[www.laspiga.com](http://www.laspiga.com)

**Reservations:** Recommended.

**Prices:** antipasti/soup/salad \$6-\$13, pasta \$11-\$15, meats 12-\$22.

**Hours:** dinner 5-11 p.m. nightly, bar open till 1:30 a.m. (bar menu available).

**Drinks:** Full bar; specialty cocktails with Italian accents; wide-ranging Italian wine list with prices to match.

**Parking:** Tough stuff, with too few pay lots nearby.

**Sound:** Not as bad as you'd think, given the wide open spaces.

**Who should go:** Armchair travelers in need of a ticket to Emilia-Romagna; fresh pasta fanatics; Capitol Hill cocktailers; the "A"-gay list; large parties.

**Credit cards:** AE, MC, V.

**Accessibility:** No wheelchair access to second-story dining area.

Ginger ) reopened nearby in the recently refurbished Piston & Ring Building.

Today, Sabrina is head chef, Pietro plays host and black-clad bartenders mix fragrant libations like the "Basilica," muddling fresh basil with vodka and lemon juice. Behind the bar, an extensive library of Italian wines stands at attention; facing it lies a row of comfortable booths. There's a mile-high ceiling, gorgeous wood-and-beam construction and a second-story dining area poised for private parties and weekend overflow.



Elsewhere in this vast room, a pasta-maker cranks out pasta fresca in a glassed-in area adjacent to the kitchen, using hand tools to cut and shape the kitchen's best efforts: thumbnail-size potato gnocchi that resists the tooth (making for an irresistible dish when paired with a light tomato sauce, \$11); and tortelli, near-translucent pasta squares (presently plumped with spinach and ricotta and served with a sage-scented gloss of butter).

Pasta verdi, when cut into ribbons of tagliatelle, gets a porcine rusticity from shards of slow-cooked wild boar for one dish. And when those silky green sheets are layered into a lasagne, with a meld of meat sauce, bechamel and Parmigiano-Reggiano (\$12), the result is far lighter than you'd ever imagine.

Though the "passatelli di formaggio di fossa in brodo di carne" reads like a mouthful, it's simply an Italian's version of Jewish penicillin: beef-enriched chicken soup floating with pasta squiggles that look — and taste — like extruded matzo balls. Too bad it arrived lukewarm.

But before you even get to the pasta, you must sample Pietro's Aunt Irene's melanzane (thin-sliced eggplant drizzled with a purée of herbs and oil) and the fritto misto di verdure (crispy fried vegetables, and sage!), listed among the sides but better as a starter.

And of course, there's that piadina.

Grilled in an iron skillet, the complimentary flatbread is best eaten warm, when its flavor strongly recalls that of baking-powder biscuits. Pair it with gnocchetti, jujube-size ricotta gnocchi with ground sausage in a truffle-scented cream sauce, and you've got a Southerner's dream dinner: biscuits and country gravy.

When stuffed with tomato sauce, fresh mozzarella and eggplant and grilled, piadina becomes a

"crescione." Sliced into triangles, it makes a bountiful bar snack. If you've had enough piadina (or are one of those nonbelievers who find it dry and flavorless), order the crostini. Dressed with chicken-liver pâté, grilled beef and truffle oil, those killer crunchies are a "carne"-vore's delight.

*Carne* — meat — is one of the many things that mark the difference between the old La Spiga and the new. Once offered as specials, those menu standards now include a very basic plate of grilled Italian sausage with polenta (\$12) and a very rustic rendering of wild-boar ribs — riblets, really — tantalizingly tender, swaddled in a tomato-based ragu and served with crisp bites of roasted potatoes (\$16).

The kitchen, however, failed twice in its efforts to produce a filet of beef tenderloin medium-well.

When my companion sliced into the most expensive dish on the menu (\$22), it ran rare, a condition duly noted by our waiter, who ran it back for a not-so-quick fix. After the "fix," the beef arrived a perfect medium-rare. Having already exchanged plates (the beef was delicious), we demurred when our waiter insisted on taking it back. Intent on keeping his customers happy — bless him — he topped off our chianti, gratis, and "bought" our cheese plate. As he should have.

That selection of ripe cheeses is culled from a lengthy list that works as well as a first course as it does a last. Speaking of last courses, I'd skip the overly gelatinous panna cotta, opting instead for stracciatella. That minty chocolate-chip gelato is a reminder that even in this spectacular new setting, simple pleasures remain the hallmark of La Spiga.

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### **Sample menu**

Affetati Misti (cured meat  
selection) \$12

Melanzane della Zia Irene  
(eggplant with green sauce) \$6

Crescione alla Parmigiana \$9

Gnocchi al pomodoro \$11

Lasagne Verdi \$12

Filetto al Tartufo \$22

Basilica cocktail \$7