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## FOOD DRINK REVIEW

BY BRAD A. JOHNSON  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY EDWARD DUARTE



ANGEL FOOD: A quiet moment at All' Angelo; chitarra spaghetti with langoustines.

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### ALL' ANGELO *Could the taste of Italian food in L.A. finally be changing all for the better?*

Food critics aren't supposed to admit things like this... but sometimes I don't feel like looking at a wine list, or even a menu. We're supposed to always be on our game, alert to every detail, filling our frontal lobes with dozens of notes, scrutinizing other customers, making judgments about the menu, poring over the wine list. But sometimes my brain gets full. Maybe it's been a long day, and I've come straight from the office, and I just want to drink a glass of wine and catch up on some gossip.

On days like this, I am grateful for restaurants like the 75-seat All' Angelo. I know the wine list here is terrific, but I've never even opened it. I don't have to, because I already know that the owner, Stefano Ongaro, is passionate about Italian wines. He is the consummate host, a natural who never stops working. Even when he's sitting down with a table of regular customers, he notices the empty water glass across the room. He knows when someone is about to need something even before they do. So when I sit down, I just ask him to bring me a glass of Lambrusco and a plate of salumi and those terrific little pieces of grilled bread that he serves. It's such a simple pleasure. I love the slightly charred taste of that bread, and the way the beautiful ribbons of fat in the prosciutto flirt with the slight effervescence of the wine. After that, maybe I'll look at the menu, or, probably, I won't. I'll just tell Ongaro to send out a nice little salad of grilled radicchio and whatever

pasta looks especially good tonight—and bring me a glass of whatever wine he thinks will go with those things.

The thing about grilled radicchio is that it's actually very difficult to pair with wine, and I have no idea what to order with it. But when somebody gets it right, the combination can be sublime. Ongaro brought a glass of Lagrein, from St. Michael Eppan in the Trentino Alto Adige. It was a deep, complex and almost bitter red wine that was rather difficult to drink by itself, but once the radicchio arrived and the two flavors started intermingling, the wine took on a completely different personality. It's as if someone slipped a Prozac into the wineglass. "Honestly, when you ordered that," said the redhead who was dining with me that night, suddenly losing interest in Danny DeVito across the room, "I thought you were crazy. I couldn't possibly fathom why anyone would want to eat grilled lettuce." She reached for another forkful. "But that stuff is delicious," she said.

The chef is Mirko Paderno. He was the original chef at Dolce Enoteca. I'm not sure how many people will actually remember this, but when Dolce first opened, the food was fantastic. The menu was entirely original and delicious. But within a few months (maybe it was longer, but it seems so short), Paderno was out, and Dolce was serving caprese salads and pastas primavera. The chef later turned up at Bridge, across the CONTINUED...

...CONTINUED street from Koi, and the early press proclaimed that the menu was going to be utterly original, unlike any other Italian restaurant in L.A. And I heard from someone who attended one of Bridge's preopening "friends and family" dinners that the food was indeed quite special, but when the restaurant finally opened, the menu felt a little bit too familiar. The "friends and family" of the owners, I heard, didn't particularly care for the unfamiliar food. And within a year, the chef had moved on.

It should be noted that, prior to Dolce and Bridge, Paderno cooked at Valentino, which is where he met Ongaro, who worked there as a waiter, then maître d' (Ongaro then moved on to help launch Enoteco Drago and, later, to help relaunch Il Grano). Now Paderno is once again displaying a rare form. The menu at All' Angelo is unlike any other Italian offering in the city. There are very few tomatoes, and none out of season. No fried calamari. No penne pesto or tiramisù. So anyone who prefers the "improved" Dolce and Bridge to the originals will probably find All' Angelo somewhat of a challenge. But the people who worship at Angelini Osteria and Pizzeria Mozza will surely find something to praise here.

There was one item early on at Bridge that stood out, one of the most amazing little appetizers in the city: the octopus carpaccio. And Paderno brought it with him here. It is a gorgeous mosaic of paper-thin octopus. It looks like a cross section of soft white marbles of varying sizes, with hues of purple, blue and pink filling the spaces between the circles. There is a nice crudo plate, too, with pristine ahi and a couple of hama hama oysters. It comes with a dollop of caviar, which is probably why this appetizer costs \$20—but, frankly, I'd rather have another oyster than all the caviar in the world. (Am I allowed to admit that?)

The pastas are universally delicious. I've enjoyed gorgeous cavatelli tossed in a very light pesto with littleneck clams and scorpion fish. I can't twirl my fork fast enough to shovel into my mouth the homemade chitarra spaghetti with langoustines. The spaghetti is cut square and cooked al dente and swirled with a spicy tomato sauce that I like to mop up with a piece of

By now, most readers have already skipped ahead to the star rating and are now trying to figure out why I gave All' Angelo only three stars if I love the food and service so much. And the truth is, I simply don't love the décor. The interior lacks personality and warmth. Sure, it's comfortable: The chairs are sturdy, and the carpet and tablecloths keep the noise to a soft din. And the Murano-glass light fixtures are pretty. But rather than coming across as simple and elegant, to me the room looks unfinished. It's the restaurant equivalent of Birkenstock shoes. So I was surprised to learn that the softly sponged paint job was the vision of respected architect/designer Osvaldo Maiozzi, who designed Vincenti in Brentwood and Valentino in Las Vegas.

I saw how hideous this space used to be before Ongaro gutted it and started with an empty slate. But it still feels too much like an empty slate. The front of the room, framed by frosted glass, is beautiful, but this isn't the best place to sit due to front-door foot traffic. And the irony is that, lately, I'm bored with L.A.'s obsession with over-designed restaurants. But can't we find a pretty, comfortable, not-too-loud and still fashionable middle ground? ☒

**ALL' ANGELO:** 7166 MELROSE AVE., L.A., 323.933.9540 **HOURS:** LUNCH, MON.–FRI., NOON–2:30PM; DINNER, MON.–SAT., 6PM–11PM. **WHO'S THERE:** AIR-KISSING, PASSIONATE AND HIGHLY ATTRACTIVE ITALIANS WHO APPEAR TO HAVE KNOWN EACH OTHER (AND THE OWNERS) FOR YEARS **WHAT TO WEAR:** FACE-HUGGING GUCCI SUNGLASSES AND MAYBE A PUCCI ASCOT. JACKETS FAR OUTNUMBER T-SHIRTS. **WHERE TO VALET:** BEWARE THE CUTTHROAT VALET WAR BEING WAGED ON MELROSE. THE VALETS FROM BUNGALOW CLUB WILL AMBUSH YOU AND TRY TO TRICK YOU INTO THINKING THEY ALSO SERVE ALL' ANGELO, BUT THERE'S ANOTHER STAND—AND A DIFFERENT VALET COMPANY ENTIRELY—DIRECTLY IN FRONT OF THE DOOR. **ABOUT THE BAR:** NO LIQUOR, ONLY BEER AND WINE. BUT THE WINES (MOSTLY ITALIAN) ARE TERRIFIC, WITH MORE THAN 20 POURED BY THE GLASS. **WHAT IT COSTS:** LUNCH, APPETIZERS \$10–\$18, ENTRÉES \$15–\$30, DESSERTS \$7–\$11; DINNER, APPETIZERS \$10–\$20, ENTRÉES \$16–\$36, DESSERTS \$7–\$11. VALET PARKING, \$6 **RATING:** ★★★

**What the stars mean:** 1 = fair, some noteworthy qualities; 2 = good, above average; 3 = very good, well above norm; 4 = excellent, among the area's best; 5 = world-class, extraordinary in every detail. Reviews are based on multiple visits. Ratings reflect the reviewer's overall reaction to food, ambience and service.

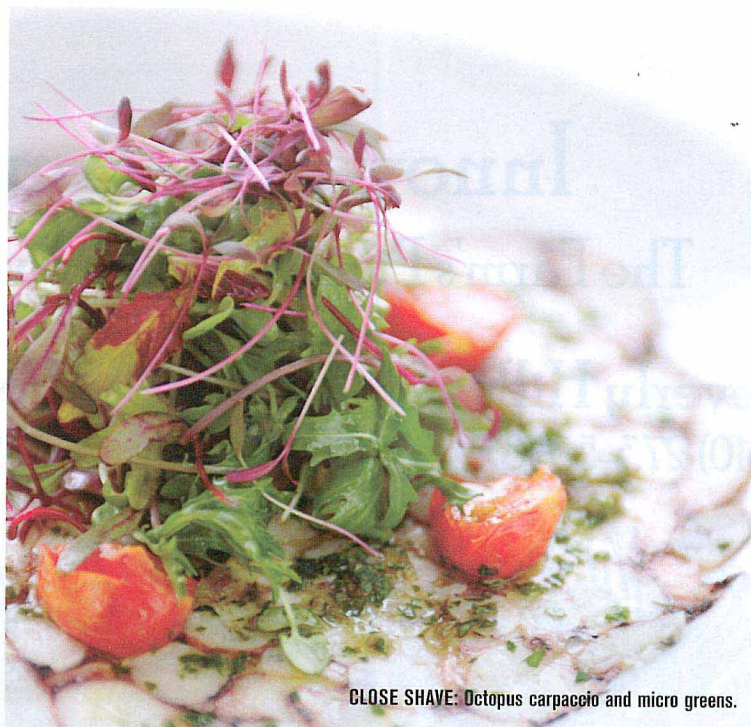
## *ONCE THE RADICCHIO ARRIVED AND THE FLAVORS STARTED INTERMINGLING, THE WINE TOOK ON A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT PERSONALITY. IT WAS AS IF SOMEONE SLIPPED A PROZAC INTO THE WINEGLASS.*

rustic, slightly springy bread. I have eaten garganelli pasta that was delightfully chewy and irresistible, folded into a hearty ragout of braised beef and black olives. From others' plates, I've stolen more than my share of mushroom-filled tortelli and oxtail-stuffed ravioli.

We've had an ambivalent relationship for years, but recently I've decided that tripe and I don't mix. I tried to enjoy the tripe that Paderno slices into shreds, braises in a tomato sauce and serves with grilled polenta. But I quickly run out of polenta, and then I don't have anything left to mask the odd, phlegmy flavor and texture of the tripe, so that it tastes a little too much like stomach lining, and suddenly I've reached my limit. On one of several visits, the chef proudly trotted out a new ravioli stuffed with tripe, which looked prettier than it tasted. Tripe and I are going our separate ways.

Sausage, on the other hand, I still love, and there's a big platter loaded with pork sausage and spare ribs. It's so rustic and simple. On the opposite end of the spectrum is the guinea hen, stuffed and rolled, roulade style, with some sort of forcemeat filling. Complicated, but nice.

Order the whole sea bream, a gorgeous, trout-like fish, and the waiter will fillet it tableside and serve it with delicious fingerlings and a drizzle of pan juices. And I enjoyed another fish, though I have completely forgotten what it was (another thing I'm not supposed to admit, I think). However, I cannot erase from memory how hauntingly delicious it was, how impossibly fresh, and how it made me wish this restaurant were prettier than it is.



**CLOSE SHAVE:** Octopus carpaccio and micro greens.