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Pizza in Edina? At Mozza Mia, si



Rick Nelson, Star Tribune

Friday night, and my friends and I dropped in for a quick, impromptu dinner at **Mozza Mia** before heading to the movies across the street. Viewed from an entertainment standpoint, we should have stayed put at the restaurant. Not that the movie was a stinker, but because watching chef Vittorio Renda at work is show enough.

Renda, an Energizer Bunny of a guy who has managed to live among chilly Minnesotans for nearly three decades without losing his sunny Italian disposition -- or his thicker-than-pesto accent -- has delivered to 50th and France what none of us never knew it needed, yet suddenly seems unthinkable to live without. And that's a decent pizzeria.

True, Renda had a little help from his longtime employer, Parasole Restaurant Holdings, and his colleague, chef Heather Brinker, who keeps the kitchen humming on a daily basis.

Mozza Mia feels like a switch from the company's usual something-for-everyone strategy, and it's a welcome one. Instead of a laundry list of middle-of-the-road crowd-

pleasers, Renda's menu is relatively short and sharply focused, just pizza and a half-dozen fresh cheeses, bookended by a few salads, bruschettas, pastas and desserts. It's a marked departure from a company that has built a thriving business on appealing to the greatest common dining denominator. By embracing authenticity and slimming down its scope, Parasole has scored. Big.

The star of the show is pizza. While it's not an epoch-altering pizza -- remember when Punch's wet, stretchy, Neapolitan-style pies materialized and the world momentarily stopped spinning on its axis? -- it is a formidably good one. Renda's formula is disarmingly simple, just an Italian low-gluten pizza flour, water, sea salt and fresh yeast with a slightly sour starter.

Throw in dough that rises for 24 hours and two high-temperature wood-burning ovens (fueled by oak with the occasional toss of Italian cherry wood for extra smoke) and you get a distinctive crust that's thin but sturdy and slightly blistered, with a marvelous crackle on the outside that yields to a lightly chewy, slightly bready interior.

Each 10-inch round is a fine foundation for 10 well-calibrated and surprisingly restrained pizzas (if you're on the lookout

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for Canadian bacon and pineapple, or a design-your-own format, look elsewhere). My favorite, the Margherita, is pizza at its most fundamental, with a thin layer of crushed San Marzano tomatoes, a few whole leaves of sweet basil, dots of mozzarella and some judicious splashes of Sicilian extra-virgin olive oil. The crowning touch is a sprinkling of dried oregano, still on its stem and crushed between the palms of the kitchen's expediter just before the pizza is rushed to the table. It's simplicity itself, and utterly delicious.

A change-up on flavors

Favorable things continue to happen when flavors grow bolder and the combinations become more complex. There's a terrific sweet-salt dance going on when tiny figs and slowly caramelized onions are paired with gorgonzola and Iowa-made prosciutto. A feisty fennel salami blends beautifully with aged provolone and those crushed San Marzanos. The only one that doesn't really work, oddly enough, is the smoked bufala mozzarella version of the Margherita; the heavily smoked cheese overpowers the other ingredients' ages-old balancing act.

Looks are important, too. Yukon gold potatoes, thinly sliced, are layered to

resemble fish scales and topped by crispy bits of prosciutto, with a creamy white cheese standing in for tomatoes, and snips of green onion adding color and bite. It was terrific hot out of the oven, and fantastic when retrieved from the refrigerator the next morning, an ideal stand-up breakfast. I loved how artichokes, onions, mushrooms and thinly sliced ham each occupy one of four quarters of another pizza, linked in the center by a runny, barely cooked egg, its broken yolk tying all the ingredients together. Another looker invokes oversized green olives, split width-wise and scattered, flat-side down, like so many church domes in an Italian cityscape, or at least one consisting of feta, pecorino and a zesty ground lamb sausage.

As its punny name underlines, Mozza Mia also takes a somewhat fanatical approach toward mozzarella. The menu touts a "bar," but rather than a setup as literal as a cheese specialist toiling behind a counter, the kitchen puts up a half-dozen fresh cheese choices, most created with mozzarella that's pulled fresh daily on the premises -- using a cow's milk curd from the East Coast -- then finished with fruity olive oil and twinkling sea salt. Whether it's served with basil and so-so hothouse-raised tomatoes, or rolled with prosciutto or smoked salmon (and paired

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with marinated bean salads, sometimes gigantes, sometimes chickpeas, always alive with garlic and herbs) or arranged with punchy arugula and flavorful cherry tomatoes, it's all pretty swell, a grazer's mini-paradise.

Even better is the generous dollop of luscious, house-made ricotta, a little cumulus cloud of dairy loveliness that's designed to be spread over thick, fragrant slices of grilled bread brushed with olive oil and rubbed with garlic and rosemary; not scarfing down every last bite seems almost criminal. Ditto the Italian-imported smoked mozzarella, made from water buffalo's milk, the smoke concentrated in its nutty-brown rind, and the luxuriously creamy burrata, served with California-raised heirloom tomatoes that manage to make the journey eastward with some flavor and texture miraculously still intact.

Don't feel like a full pizza? Check out the bruschettas. The open-faced delights include a pile of curly frisee and hefty chunks of Sicilian canned tuna, and a wonderfully homey mix of house-made plum preserves spread over a ricotta-chèvre mash-up.

Well, not perfect

There are a few missteps. Do the salads sometimes taste harshly acidic? Yes. Can the kitchen crew get clumsy with the olive oil and salt? Occasionally. Is \$16 a lot to pay for a pizza? Maybe. Then there are the rustic, affordably priced pastas. While they're not trying to be anything other than straight-up comfort food, they also don't compare to the far more interesting pizzas and cheeses, and their presence on the menu suggests that management is hedging its bets. Ditto the desserts. The gelato, garnished with sweet preserved cherries, really hits the spot, but a messy strawberry tiramisu and an all-too-familiar chocolate torte feel like unnecessary afterthoughts.

The setting isn't fancy. Moschella + Roberts, Parasole's New York City-based design squad, keeps the surroundings very simple. The walls are a dull black, the floor is unfinished concrete, the light pouring out of the kitchen is harshly bright and the uncomfortable chairs are an intentionally mismatched jumble. My favorite seats line both sides of a marble-topped counter, when the warmth of the side-by-side pizza ovens takes the chill off a frigid January evening.

The overall effect appears to be aiming for "industrial," but it comes off feeling slightly unfinished, and the hard surfaces can make

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for some challenging acoustics when the place is running full tilt, which is more often than not. The only traces of luxury are several vast stretches of pearly Carrara marble, enough to invoke a serious case of envy among the kitchen renovation-minded.

Another reason for admiration: timing. Because nothing is terribly complicated, and the pizzas require about two minutes of baking time, the food flies out of the kitchen. Mozza Mia is also one of those rare pizzerias that accept reservations, which adds predictability to the going-out equation. The nearby Edina Cinema should be diverting a cut of its box office to Parasole, because dinner and a 7:30 film screening have seldom seemed easier.

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