



# diningout

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# BRAVO! BRAVO!

## Gaetano's one of area's best Italian restaurants

Never trust an Italian restaurant with an autographed Frank Sinatra photo on the wall. Exhibit A: west suburban Forest Park's Gaetano's, a Sinatra-less, glossy picture-free dining room, and one of the best Italian restaurants at which I've ever eaten.

I'm sure there's a fairly good Sinatra photo-clad Italian dining room somewhere. But for most places, especially a red sauce joint built after, say, 1995, the presence of an Ol' Blue Eyes photo probably only means the owner was crafty at swooping in with a last-minute bid on eBay.

And if the place is one of those historic joints with the dusty Chianti bottles filled with Rat Pack debauchery, that Sinatra photo is usually emblematic of the fact that the restaurant stopped providing quality food the minute it started relying on the idea that famous people ate there, letting everything else slide.

Gaetano's, on the other hand, indulges in no fame. For the past four years, it has served the western suburbs, its cooks — heads down, pizza peel in hand — lovingly roasting chops and firing airy focaccia and pasta in its wood-burning oven. That is not to say people



The Napoleon boasts golden-brown phyllo shards stuffed with vanilla bean-flecked custard and honey-sweet peaches.

don't know about Gaetano's. But there's good neighborhood restaurant notoriety, and then there's Mario Batali notoriety.

Gaetano's has the former. It deserves the latter.

Since 1978, Gaetano's owner, chef Gaetano Di Benedetto, has prepared dinners for Italian presidents and cooked for the 2002 Italian Winter Olympic team. But these days, cooking for fussy Italian dignitaries and those who revere protein shakes

doesn't move the Q rating. "Top Chef" is where it's at.

But who needs "Top Chef" when you have the loudest restaurant facade in the world: a marble-painted stucco wall featuring a giant whisk and a "Juliet



Gaetano's Italian restaurant in Forest Park knows how to treat seafood right as evidenced by this Zuppa di pesce alla Siciliana. | JOHN J. KIM -SUN-TIMES PHOTOS

balcony" clad with a clothesline hung with a leopard-print dress, an Epcot-meets-Vegas re-creation of an old world storefront.

Gaetano's dining room, recently remodeled, is a little more muted. It features faux adobe, twilight-painted walls and a Christmas-light clad tree stump, a style best described as Italian grotto. Gaetano's bathroom also has one of the coolest faucets (a waterfall made from a series of rustic clay water buckets) ever.

When the lights go down,

everything fades away and Gaetano's is mostly about great food and great service. Servers know the difference between a Sangiovese and a Primitivo. They fold your napkin every time you use the restroom, and they set thick ribeye steaks on fire table-side, carefully extinguishing and removing the ash without setting any guests on fire.

Gargantuan portions abound, perfect for crazy foodies who can't help themselves. And I can't.

Who could, what with *datteri con polpettina di manzo al cocco*, shiny supple dates stuffed with spicy luscious chorizo and beef swimming in a silky tomato coconut sauce?

Carpaccio at Italian restaurants is usually a throwaway of dry beef topped with wilting arugula, shaved parm and mediocre olive oil. At Gaetano's, silky, intensely marbled, rare, shaved Kobe beef is splashed with heady pumpkin oil and fiery Calabrian pepper paste.

It's topped with crunchy rich toasted pumpkin and sunflower seeds and finally drizzled with the bright cutting acidity of all things — soy-lime vinaigrette. Original, inspiring and global, it's a successful mash up of what might happen if Charlie Trotter, Tony Mantuano (Spiaggia) and the Nobu Matsuhisha collaborated on carpaccio.

The *zuppa di pesce alla Siciliana* is Gaetano's alone, plump briny scallops and shrimp wafting a garlic tomato per-

fume from an underlying fumet, clearly a nod to his childhood in the coastal town of Bagheria near Palermo, Sicily.

Seafood is treated well at Gaetano's. Scallops are well-seared and nicely nested in perfectly al dente lemon-sauced risotto. Sweet and salty crab is stuffed between a brontosaurus-sized griddle-marked pork chop. I actually order this because the idea of pork mixed with crab seems like some kind of cosmic joke, a stoner's dream surf and



Hearty servings like this Costoletta di maiale al granchio e gorgonzola (thick-cut pork chop stuffed with crab and cheese) are the norm at Gaetano's.

### GAETANO'S ★★★★½

7636 W. Madison, Forest Park (708) 366-4010; gaetanoforestpark.com

Hours: 5 p.m. – 9:30 p.m. Monday – Thursday; 4:30 p.m. – 10:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday

Prices: Antipasti \$9-\$12; zuppe and insalate \$6-\$11; risotto and pasta \$16-\$25; darni \$23-\$25; desserts \$7

Try: Kobe carpaccio, zuppa di pesce, rigatoni alla trasterverina, costoletta di maiale (pork chop stuffed with crab)

In a bite: One of the best modern Italian restaurants in the Chicago area.

KEY: ★★★★★ Extraordinary; ★★★★★ Excellent; ★★★★★ Very Good; ★ Good; Zero stars: Poor

turf. I need to verify it's as terrible as it sounds. But the joke's on me as I realize, sucking on the bare pork bone like a lollipop, that I may have gained five pounds.

Or maybe the extra girth I'm



The Rigatoni alla Trastaverina pasta entree (left) and the Datteri con polpettina di manzo al cocco (dates stuffed with chorizo) appetizer are among Gaetano's many flavorful offerings.



bound to collect is coming from the *rigatoni alla trasterverina*, hunks of hand-pulled caramelized sausage and satisfyingly chewy pasta tubes swaddled in wild mushroom-laden, tomato-cream sauce mixed with a tangy, melting dollop of goat cheese.

Calories are not coming from the butternut squash gnocchi of which I only eat a bit. It's not that the dish is bad. But almost everything I've eaten here tonight is best in class, and these gnocchi are just a touch short of the angel whisper-light gnocchi I've had elsewhere.

Of course, less gnocchi means more gluttony over dessert, an Italian Neapolitan of sorts — golden-brown phyllo shards stuffed with indulgent vanilla bean-flecked custard and honey-sweet peaches.

The first rule of Italian restaurants is that you shouldn't take Italians to them. They grew up eating the standards, and as long as their mothers and grandmothers didn't screw things up too badly, it's tough for anyone, even a top chef, to top nostalgia. And yet, my dining companions, who still make pork neck bone

gravy on Sunday afternoon, seem just as satisfied as me. Of course, as I sit back and reflect on how Gaetano's might be one of the best Italian restaurants in the Chicago area, a certain familiar crooner invades the house music system, asking me to "come fly" with him.

On second thought, I didn't hear nuthin'.

Michael Nagrant is a local freelance writer. E-mail the Sun-Times Dining section at diningout@suntimes.com with questions and comments.