

Celebratory, urbane northern Italian dining

In Europe, people sit down to lunch at two o'clock and finish at five. Perbacco, the urbane new northern Italian restaurant lets you do that here — joyfully eat and drink your way through a holiday afternoon.

One such day, two of us began a celebration with Harry's Bar cocktails (hard-to-find Carpano Antica and gin, served up), and a photogenic plate of house-made salumi (\$12). Each slice was so tissue-thin, it immediately released its flavors on the tongue, like the pepper, wine and fruitiness in salame al barolo, the first of many dishes that would show off chef/owner Staffan Terje's talent for meat cookery.

The second was a warm pig's head terrine called coppa di testa (\$7). Don't panic — it's more terrine than head, a mosaic of different bits of pork barely molded together and topped with a pickle-y vinaigrette — one of the best starters in town.

Consider Terje's exquisite tajarin, a tangle of thin, delicate, housemade tagliatelle topped with five-hour pork sugo, a meat sauce so buttery and integrated, it practically melts into the noodles (\$10/\$15). This is a destination dish if there ever was one.

Not far behind in my esteem are agnolotti dal plin (\$10/\$15), "little priest's caps" of house-made pasta lusciously filled with a paste of veal and cabbage, sauced only with the juices of roasted meat.

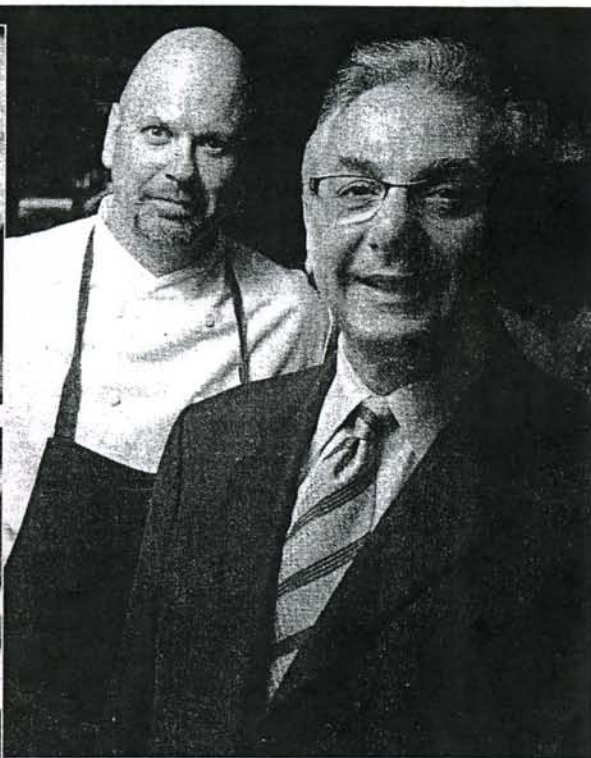
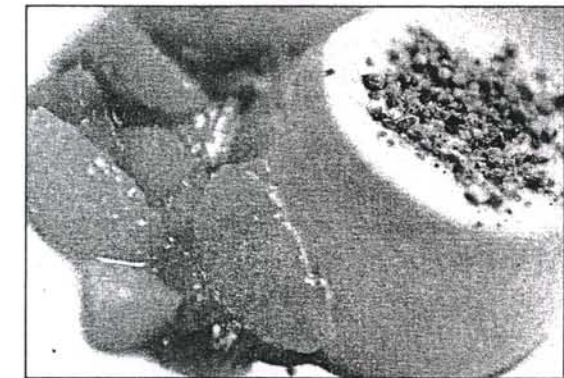
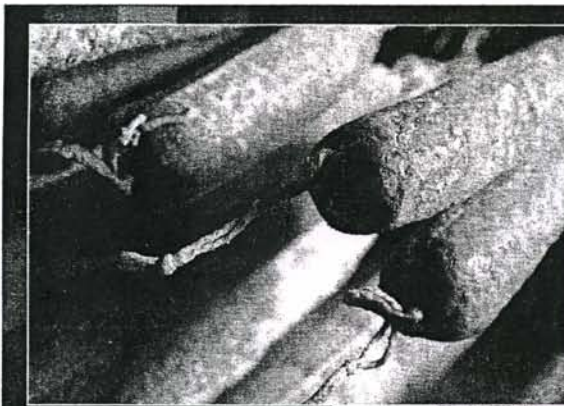
Terje's fish cooking shines too, as evidenced by a crescent of crunchily semolina-crust skate, with a juicy orange and fennel salad (\$22).

Mussels and roasted tomatoes tasted awfully good with excitingly al dente spaghettini (\$17), just the way it's done in southern Italy.

But if you're in the mood for spaghetti and meatballs, you're in luck. Garganelli (\$10/\$15), "little wind pipes" tossed in tomato sauce, get big, moist, balls of ground veal and pork. Terje, who was Swedish before turning Italian, shows particular affinity for the meatball.

The man is a bona fide Italian chef now, having spent a whole career heading the original Piatti in Yountville and the wildly popular Scala's Bistro near Union Square in San Francisco. Now he's teamed up with Umberto Gibin, a native Venetian and a super pro in the dining room, as partners in Perbacco.

Gibin, who knows practically everyone in town, sets the warm, welcoming, anything-is-possible, tone. He's an Italian wine expert and



Above: Perbacco's chef/owner Staffan Terje, left, and partner Umberto Gibin have created a winning dining experience in just a short time. Left: Their offerings include house-cured salumi, top, which gets shaved into tissue-thin slices and integrated into appetizer plates, center. A shimmering pistachio panna cotta with tangerine, orange, and a touch of acacia honey syrup, bottom, highlights the dessert menu. — Jason Steinberg/Special to The Examiner

PERBACCO

Location: 230 California St., San Francisco
Contact: (415) 955-0663 or www.perbaccosf.com
Hours: 11:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday through Thursday, and until 11 p.m. Friday; 5 to 11 p.m. Saturday; closed Sunday
Price range: Starters \$6 to \$12; main courses \$14 to \$29
Recommended dishes: Salumi, coppa di testa, tajarin, agnolotti, skate, pork shoulder roasted in milk, pistachio panna cotta
Credit cards: All major • **Reservations:** Recommended

offers some of his tastiest wines in half carafes, which greatly enhances the Perbacco experience — you can drink well and just enough.

The long, red brick space with a marble bar, sleek leather banquettes and crisp linen, transports you to

Milan. Separate dining areas buzz with their own rhythms. Lingering over shimmering pistachio-infused panna cotta (\$7), delightful with a little glass of honeyed Moscato, late into the afternoon, feels absolutely necessary.

Though only a month old, Perbacco already has the aura of a grown-up restaurant. The versatile, affordable menu encourages a bite at the bar or a three-hour meal. Enthusiastic service has improved with each visit.

And best of all, this ambitious, bustling, big-city operation feels right for its location — in the heart of

the Financial District, yet only a few blocks from the farmers market on the Embarcadero. I've seen the chef push a loaded cart right up California Street straight into his kitchen!

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