

RESTAURANT

HOSPITALITY

INDUSTRY BUZZ & MORE
EDITED BY
BOB KRUMMERT

MAXED OUT: At Perbacco, chef Staffan Terje's kitchen has been busy from Day One.



Great, Right Out of the Gate

Ask anyone in the restaurant business. The last thing San Francisco needed was another Italian restaurant. And if anyone were to open one, probably the last place they'd want to locate it would be downtown on the 200 block of California Street, where their immediate neighbors would include Tadich Grill, the iconic, 156-year-old San Francisco restaurant still doing dynamite business, and Aqua, the renowned temple of gastronomy where Laurent Manrique just landed two Michelin stars. Good luck getting noticed there. As for anyone attempting to pull off that authentic Italian thing using a chef from Sweden...boy, that would be a tough sell in a savvy restaurant town like this.

Add it all up and the degree-of-difficulty factors aligned against the new Perbacco were formidable. But patrons who came with a "who needs this?" attitude changed it to "where have you been all my life?" after their initial visit. The buzz for this operation, whose menu features rustic takes on Northern Italian cuisine from the Piemonte and Liguria regions, began building from opening day last October, and it peaked in early January when the *San Francisco Chronicle's* take-no-prisoners restaurant critic Michael Bauer gave it a glowing three-star review. It demonstrates that in the restaurant business, no matter what, great food and service still trump all.

HANDS ON:
Owner Umberto Gibin runs the front of the house at Perbacco.



"For such a young restaurant, Perbacco seems fully realized," Bauer wrote. "Everything is excellent." Other local critics came to the same conclusion: Swedish chef and all, San Francisco had a hit on its hands.

Perbacco—a word Italians use to express pleasure and surprise—is the brainchild of owner Umberto Gibin and chef/owner Staffan Terje. They learned what makes restaurants tick during tours of duty at some of San Francisco's finest restaurants, and they're putting that knowledge to work at Perbacco.

Gibin's resume includes stints at the legendary Ernie's, the Fifth Floor, Masa's and Larry Mindel's Poggio in Sausalito. It's no wonder Perbacco's service has been so smooth since opening day.

Terje might have grown up and begun his career in Sweden, but his credentials for producing great Italian food are impeccable. His first U. S. job was at the original Piatti in Yountville, and he ran the kitchen at the popular and packed Scala's Bistro in San Francisco for eight years prior to signing on with Perbacco.

Resumes aside, Gibin and Terje, who have known each other for 15 years, just seem to mesh. "When imagining Perbacco I knew Terje would be my complement in the kitchen," says Gibin. "His passion and knowledge for Italian cuisine add an essential—an unmatched—dimension."

"It was important for me that Perbacco provide an authentic Italian experience, and Gibin goes out of his way to ensure that each and every guest gets a taste of this," Terje chimes in.

A lot of these guests come

from San Francisco's nearby financial district, one reason the location was chosen. There's plenty of lunch business up for grabs, and we're talking a suit-wearing crowd with expense accounts, not cubicle dwellers. Similarly, after-work bar business is brisk—the separate bar menu features Terje's house-cured salumi—and dinner brings out the destination diners, of whom there have been plenty.

Architecture firm Cass Calder Smith, whose other San Francisco restaurant clients have included Rose Pistola, Azie and Lulu, pulled off quite a trick at Perbacco. It dressed up the 6,000-sq.-ft. space with a design scheme that seems sleek and urbane and grown-up, but sleek and urbane and grown-up in an Italian big-city kind of way. The place seats 120, another 40 can squeeze into the bar area and the private dining space can accommodate another 40 guests.

Check averages in the early going are \$25 at lunch, \$55-\$60 at dinner. Considering the quality of its food and the surroundings, those prices provide Perbacco with a strong value proposition.

So enticing is the starter portion of this 37-item menu that we wonder how many patrons ever make it to the main course.

Topping the list are five crudos, including Hamachi



prepared with blood orange essence, shaved fennel and orange oil (\$12), and bigeye tuna served with a green tomato vinaigrette and serrano chile (\$12). Then it's salumi. Terje was a butcher before becoming a chef, and all of his six house-cured offerings are standouts.

Appetizers run the gamut from the unusual (warm coppa di testa—pig's head terrine accompanied by pickled shallots and mustard vinaigrette; \$7) to more standard fare like grilled Monterey squid with corona beans, arugula, roasted tomato and orange vinaigrette (\$10).

Soup and risotto offerings flank a lineup of six pasta courses. Thus those who opt for one of the six entrees have probably skipped two dozen interesting options to leave room.

Which is part of the plan. A meal at Perbacco gives guests the feeling they'll need to come back to sample tasty items they passed over on their first visit. Gibin and Terje will be ready for them when they do.



STREET BEAT: High profile restaurant neighbors—Tadich Grill and Aqua—haven't kept Perbacco from filling its 120-seat dining room.



RUSTIC: Grilled Monterey squid was an instant signature starter at Perbacco. So was the pig's head terrine.