

SF WEEKLY



Instant Italian

Perbacco gets it right straight out of the gate

BY ROBERT LAURISTON

Perbacco, 230 California (between Front & Battery), 955-0663, www.perbaccosf.com. Open Monday through Thursday from 11:30 a.m. to 10 p.m., Friday 11:30 a.m. to 10 p.m., and Saturday 5:30 p.m. to 11 p.m. Reservations accepted. Wheelchair accessible. Parking: difficult at lunch, valet \$9 dinner only. Muni: 1, 10, 15, 41. Noise level: moderate.

What accounts for a restaurant's success? The conventional wisdom is that location is paramount, but while Tadich Grill has had a line out the door since it moved to California Street in 1967, its next-door neighbor the Gold Coast Restaurant failed in 2002. The new tenant, Perbacco, seems to have found the formula — this upscale Italian joint has been jumping at both lunch and dinner from the day it opened last month. So what changed?

One improvement: The former dim, divey pub has been completely remodeled. You enter into a large, well-lit, high-ceilinged room that runs all the way through to the back alley. On one side, an exposed brick wall backs the well-stocked bar, on the other a row of small leather booths recall the former old-school atmosphere. To make it more obvious to passers-by that Perbacco is a restaurant, the street end of the bar features a gorgeous red antique hand-cranked meat slicer and a glass-front refrigerator filled with cured meats. Don't let the often intimidatingly well-groomed, Armani-suited crowd at the bar scare you off — there are plenty of schlubby S.F. foodies in wrinkled Dockers in the back.

Past the bar is the main dining room, split into two distinct sections: one with a view of the open kitchen in the back and the same high ceilings and buzz as the bar, the other quieter with lower ceilings

and a cozier feel. There's also a chef's table right next to the kitchen, several private rooms upstairs, and room for future additional seating on the mezzanine.

Another plus: good service. On four visits, even though the place hadn't been open three weeks, the staff was coordinated, polished, and professional — more so than most places are after a year — and at the same time friendly and welcoming. There were a few minor start-up glitches, but they were handled with finesse. For example, a couple of times servers came back to the table to double-check one item on an order.

And then, of course, there's the food. The dinner menu's impressively long: One night, it included five "crudo" seafood appetizers; six cold cuts, most house-made, available individually or in small or large combo platters; six hot appetizers; four salads; a soup; a risotto; seven pastas, most offered in small or large servings; seven entrees; and five vegetable sides. This assortment invites tapas-style dining, and the waiters are good about serving things for easy sharing. The lunch menu's a shortened version of the same: strike the crudo, cold cuts, and pasta half-portion, and add a couple of sandwiches. From 2:30 to 5:30, between lunch and dinner service, the dining room's closed, but a large selection of appetizers is served at the bar.

Many dishes draw on northern regional traditions. Brandacujun, for example, is the Ligurian version of the salt cod purée the French call brandade, made with lots of buttery olive oil, so it's exceptionally rich. Soma d'aj is Piemonte's name for bruschetta, toasted slices of crusty bread rubbed with garlic and brushed with olive oil. One day, the kitchen topped it with a delightful mix of burrata (extra-creamy mozzarella), roasted artichokes, fresh mint, and pitted green olives. Hot seafood appetizers such as fritto misto of smelt, rock shrimp, green beans, yellow wax beans, olives, and fennel served with a lemon aioli, or grilled squid with borlotti beans and preserved lemon, are like the ones served in Veneto's wine bars.

House-made salumi seem to be a mandatory item on Italian menus these days, and Perbacco's rank among the best. Standouts are a very vinous salame al barbara, made with red wine, and a



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great spicy coppa. The imported San Daniele prosciutto's also great.

The cold appetizers are colorful and complex. A rainbow of sweet, thin-sliced red, orange, and yellow roasted beets with nutty green rocket are delicious in a white balsamic dressing with a sprin-

lentils and braised escarole was a relatively light version of this classic New Year's Eve dish.

With such ample accompaniments to the entrees, you might not need the a la carte side dishes, but at \$5 each for big, sharing-sized helpings of seasonal

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ging of mild blue cheese. Sliced pears, curly endive, and chopped chestnuts in a chestnut honey vinaigrette are equally good, but one tiny slice of the promised Gorgonzola seemed stingy.

Among the first courses, don't miss the unusual Ligurian specialty pansotti, ravioli filled with a savory mix of greens, herbs, and ricotta, tossed with a chunky walnut sauce. Also great are the papardelle (thin, wide fresh noodles) sauced with a deeply beefy short-rib sauce. The butternut squash mezzelune (another ravioli variation) in brown sage butter are on the sweet side — a big helping of the offered extra cheese might help offset that. The soup varies daily: A thick purée of cannellini beans with rosemary and olive oil with crispy, fried prosciutto was perfect cold-weather food.

The chef, Staffan Terje (formerly at Scala's Bistro), is a genius at braising. Arguably the best dish on the menu is a luscious milk-braised Berkshire pork shoulder, which he manages to cook until it's soft enough to eat with a spoon without the meat losing its shape — on the plate, it looks like a thick pork chop. It's served with a pile of intensely aromatic roasted fennel and a big dollop of extra-corny polenta cooked with Savoy cabbage for a deeper flavor and more interesting texture. Or perhaps the best dish is the short-rib stracotto, which quite literally melts in your mouth, almost like some magic custard of beef and red wine. That comes with an earthy celery root purée and a bright green celery salad including lots of leaves. A daily special of house-made cotichino sausage with

vegetables such as beet greens sautéed with garlic in abundant olive oil or roasted Brussels sprouts in brown butter with capers, they're the best value on the menu.

With all those temptations, it's hard to save room for dessert, but I managed to try two of the lighter choices. A slice of sharp Gorgonzola drizzled with funky chestnut honey was an explosion of sweet, sharp, and earthy flavors and aromas, countered by some mild toasted almonds and seedless grapes macerated in wine. Perbacco's panna cotta is the most delicate imaginable: I tried to take a little bite with a fork, and the little puncture caused the soft mound to split in two, torn apart by its own weight. The mild milky-vanilla flavor was nicely offset by a sauce of pink grapefruit, oranges, and thin slices of candied kumquat.

The long wine list draws on the same northern regions as the menu, and has many interesting bottles you won't find elsewhere, such as a choice of grignolino, a light fruity red that pairs well with the rich food. Skip the Vietti "Perbacco" nebbiolo — sure, it's cute that it has the same name as the restaurant, but it's not a very interesting wine.

The usual reviewer's rule is to allow a month or so for a place to get its act together before bringing the critical palate and pen to bear. Perbacco doesn't need to be cut that slack: It has already hit its stride.

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Perbacco	
Roasted beets	...\$9
Salt cod purée	...\$9
Canellini soup	...\$9
Mixed salumi platter	...\$12 lunch, \$18/\$30 dinner
Pansotti	...\$11/\$16
Short-rib stracotto	...\$21 lunch/\$22 dinner
Milk-braised pork	...\$19 lunch/\$21 dinner