

DINING OUT

BY MICHAEL BAUER

Luscious Italian-inspired dishes entice at Perbacco in San Francisco

Perbacco is a restaurant that excites on many levels. For one, it's inspiring to see a talented chef who had seemed stifled in a previous job now break out on his own. It's equally satisfying to witness a space that once languished come to life.

The previous occupant, the Gold Coast, which closed in 2001, never seemed to have a solid following, which is odd since it was located on the same block as two blockbuster restaurants: Aqua and Tadich Grill. Obviously the location was fine, but the concept and atmosphere were wrong.

It took Cass Calder Smith, who designed LuLu and Terzo, among other places, to change the feng shui, and owner Umberto Gibin to add cachet to the front of the house. Staffan Terje, formerly of Scala's Bistro, has done his part by giving the Italian-inspired food the deep, rustic countenance that draws crowds.

Old meets new in the sprawling, somewhat awkward transformed space, where the former kitchen was turned into a dining room, and the main eating area became a large, utilitarian open kitchen. Smith cut half of the original ceiling away, making way for a two-story space as well as a dining mezzanine enclosed with long horizontal windows. The low ceilings in that room and the dining room below lend a womblike feel, perfect for those who want to have a more intimate conversation. There are also several private dining rooms.

The downstairs action is stoked by the long marble bar near the entrance and the kitchen that anchors the back. In all, the main restaurant seats 120, with 40 in the bar.

Smith exposed the brick walls, added a polished marble floor and



The staff at Perbacco in downtown San Francisco hustles to serve a full house at dinnertime.

comfortable deep red leather-like vinyl upholstered banquettes that match the seats on the dark wood chairs. The area under the mezzanine is covered in light slatted wood, making another cozy nook where diners can look out on the tall-ceilinged space beyond. It's truly a restaurant that can accommodate just about any mood.

Of course, the place still has some quirks, such as the utilitarian staircase leading to the basement restrooms, outfitted with four stalls and the increasingly popular communal sinks. However, the overall feeling is festive, casual and fun.

Terje, who earned his chops with Donna Scala, owner of Bistro Don Giovanni, cooks with a similar rustic style. He's retained some of the Provençal influences he incorporated into the food at Scala's, but at Perbacco

he is inspired by the cuisine of Piedmont and Liguria.

I would have considered my first visit a success even if none of the dishes resonated other than the addictive thin, crisp breadsticks brought when you sit down. They're perfect with a platter of house-made salumi (\$18/\$30) that includes unctuous shredded pork pate, spicy cured pork shoulder and various salamis that coat the tongue with a rich, seasoned glaze of fat. Fortunately, what followed was equally impressive.

Terje is adept at rustic preparations, including a wonderful warm pig's head terrine (\$7) served with pickled shallots and a tangy mustard vinaigrette; hand-cut carne cruda of veal (\$12) punched up with a black truffle salsa; and a creamy, tangy salt cod mixed with mashed potatoes (\$9),

the Ligurian version of brandade.

Other appetizers, such as a fritto misto of rock shrimp, lemons, green beans, fennel and olives (\$11), have a more universal appeal, as do items such as radicchio salad with creamy garlic dressing (\$9), and grilled squid (\$10) with corona beans and orange vinaigrette.

The menu is so involved it's hard to know where to begin, which makes me a little nervous about Terje keeping tabs on all 37 preparations. My fear is that over time the focus will lessen, but for now just about everything is excellent, including the five crudos, such as hamachi drizzled with blood orange (\$12).

Adding a pasta course is a way to taste more food and to capture a little piece of the Italian lifestyle. Two could easily go down in my personal



Agnolotti dal plin is filled with roasted veal and served with a meat sauce and savoy cabbage.

PERBACCO

230 California St. (near Battery), San Francisco; (415) 955-0663.
Lunch 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Monday-Friday; dinner 5:30-10 p.m. Monday-Thursday, until 11 p.m. Friday-Saturday. Full bar. Reservations and credit cards accepted. Valet \$10 at night.

Overall	★★★
Food	★★★
Service	★★
Atmosphere	★★★
Prices	\$\$\$
Noise Rating	▲▲▲▲

Pluses: Exceptional Italian-inspired food. Salumi, pasta and rustic main courses shine, as does panna cotta. Well-designed interior; upstairs is great for quiet conversations. Excellent wine list.

Minuses: Downstairs can be noisy; some staff members are inexperienced.

RATINGS KEY

★★★★ Extraordinary ★★★ Excellent
★★ Good ★ Fair □ Poor

(\$) Inexpensive: entrees \$10 and under
(\$\$) Moderate: \$11-\$17
(\$\$\$) Expensive: \$18-\$24
(\$\$\$\$) Very Expensive: more than \$25

Prices are based on main courses. When entrees fall between these categories, the prices of appetizers help determine the dollar ratings.

▲ Pleasantly quiet (less than 65 decibels)
▲▲ Can talk easily (65-70)
▲▲▲ Talking normally gets difficult (70-75)
▲▲▲▲ Can talk only in raised voices (75-80)
▲▲▲▲▲ Too noisy for normal conversation (80+)

Chronicle critics make every attempt to remain anonymous. All meals are paid for by The Chronicle. Star ratings are based on a minimum of three visits. Ratings are updated continually based on at least one revisit.



Salumi misti: shredded pork pate, spicy cured pork shoulder and salamis.

Pasta Hall of Fame (along with the duck alla bolognese from Bistro Don Giovanni and the spaghetti with tomato and basil from Delfina).

The agnolotti dal plin (\$10/\$15), tiny packets stuffed with veal, are served with a rich meat sauce with filmy wisps of savory cabbage that cling to the pasta like cheese, adding another lusty, fresh element. The hand-cut tagliatelle adds a sensual slip to the already rich five-hour pork sugo (\$10/\$15), reinforced with porcini mushrooms. The texture is wonderfully luxurious, a perfect match of pasta and topping. Close behind would be Terje's pappardelle with braised short rib ragout with roasted

chanterelles (\$12/\$16).

The same gutsy tenor is evident in the seven main courses, particularly the milk-braised pork shoulder (\$19), served with creamy polenta mixed with savoy cabbage. The thick chunk of pale meat cuts so easily it practically falls apart with a fork.

Beef short ribs (\$21) have an almost blackened charcoal look, the tender square of meat still gently attached to the bone, poised next to a creamy puddle of black truffle celery root puree. A small salad of celery leaves alongside seems to intensify and support the other elements. Pan-roasted chicken (\$19), bronzed and

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Mostly Italian wine list encourages exploration

The selections on Perbacco's wine list are excellent and the wines are well priced, considering the inventory and care taken in storage and service.

Although it covers 15 pages, the choices are clearly laid out by region so as not to seem overwhelming or intimidating. In addition to three flights, ranging from \$14 to \$18.50, there are 21 wines by the glass, quarter-liter and half-liter.

Most Italian regions are represented, peppered with some inexpensive gems such as the 2005 Di Giovanna Grillo (\$35), an interesting Sicilian white ideal for crudo and some of the fish dishes. There's also a well-selected collection of California appellations.

To me, Staffan Terje's rustic Italian food pairs better with red wine, so it's nice to have a good selection of white in half-bottles, including the 2005 Tiefenbrunner Pinot Grigio (\$17) and the 2005 Cantina Del Taburno Falanghina (\$18).

Red wines run the gamut from light and subtle to bold and complex, with current vintages and some older vintages such as 1995 and 1997. For the lighter dishes, look at such wines as the 2003 Moccagatta Barbera d'Alba (\$34) and the 2004 Massolino Dolcetto d'Alba (\$35). It's also interesting to try one of the Italian Pinot Noirs, such as the 2004 Jermann Red Angel (\$50).

In addition to wine, there are 10 beers and a full bar where you can get classic American, Italian and creative cocktails.

If you bring your own wine, corkage is \$20.

— M.B.

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crispy, sits atop a mound of Jerusalem artichokes and wild mushrooms; it's a totally satisfying combination.

The dry-aged sirloin steak (\$29), perfectly pink and tender, is topped with an herb, fennel and breadcrumb mixture enriched with bone marrow and served with roasted fingerling potatoes that have a thin, glass-like bronzed crust and a Dolcetto-stained deep purple sauce.

Even the fish have a hearty bent. The wild steelhead (\$22) is served on a bed of crushed potatoes with sorrel cream and hefty dices of sweet beets that add the perfect contrast to the dish.

About the only disappointment was the crostata dessert (\$7), currently topped with pumpkin, because the crust was soggy. Both the poached pears (\$7), lined up on a froth of Pro-



Chef and co-owner Staffan Terje sauces dishes in Perbacco's kitchen.

secco sabayon, and the gelato — a trio of chocolate, espresso and salted caramel (\$7) — are satisfying. Still, the must-order sweets include pistachio panna cotta, which practically falls

apart when it sees the spoon (\$7), and chocolate tart (\$8) topped with a mound of whipped cream and caramelized hazelnuts.

While Terje has control of the

kitchen, Gibin wields as much authority in the front of the house. He's a pro after heading up high-profile places such as Ernie's, Fifth Floor, Masa's and Poggio.

His mastery is reflected in the young staff, crisply dressed in white shirts, black pants, aprons and subdued neckties. While a few are inexperienced — manifested by not knowing when to pick up glasses and plates, and stumbling with some descriptions — they know the basics and with time should settle in.

Yet for such a young restaurant, Perbacco seems fully realized. While some may argue the city doesn't need is another Italian restaurant, Terje and Gibin prove there's always room for a place that does it right. ♦

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