



Perbacco

230 California St.
Cross: Battery St.
San Francisco, CA 94111

415-955-0663
[website](#)

Lunch Mon-Fri 11:30am-2:30pm
Dinner Mon-Thu 5:30pm-10pm, Fri-Sat 5:30pm-11pm

Crudos \$12
Salumi \$6-\$30
Apps \$7-\$14
Pastas \$11-\$20
Entrées \$18-\$29
Desserts \$5-\$8

NOVEMBER 21, 2006 | SAN FRANCISCO Okay, check it out: a new Italian restaurant has opened and whaddya know, it's not some 49-seat number that's tucked into [insert your neighborhood here] with wood chairs, a traditional menu of minestrone, a radicchio salad with gorgonzola cheese, and a few classic pasta (don't forget the risotto) and meat dishes. No hawkers out front. No Chianti fiascos hanging around.

Really? ~PERBACCO~!

Yes, literally. (The ristorante's name directly translates as "For Bacchus!," an exclamation not unlike "Hot damn!" or "Rad!" which are both pretty close to the response I had after eating there.) This refreshing addition to the San Francisco Italian dining landscape is following tenets similar to the very successful A16 concept (focus on a specific region in Italy, make some excellent and legit food from that region, have a killer wine list, and design a cool restaurant to contain it all), but Perbacco is focusing on the Northern Piemontese region, with daytrips to the Ligurian coast, and some added contemporary flair.

And the space, hoo whee. It's chic, sleek, and feels very urban and polished. And it's big, try 6,000-square-feet, with something like 120 seats, and two private rooms upstairs (The Barolo Room and The Barbaresco Room, natch).

The historic building has an olive green exterior and gleaming silver letters that spell out PERBACCO all in caps (slick font choice, by the way). Upon entering the space, the first thing you notice is the long brick wall that runs the length of the building, which hints to its provenance as the Hind Building, dating back to 1912.

Some of you may remember the space as the home of the pub-like Gold Coast, but all traces of its ye olde vibe are quite gone. Instead, you'll find a gleaming Carrera marble bar with a gorg red restored Berkel meat slicer parked right by it. (I got to touch it.) There are padded and modern bar seats that run the length of the bar, plus some booths along the wall for bar-area diners.

Follow the marble tile runway down the shotgun space and once you're seated in one of the two dining areas, you'll begin to note details like the luxe cognac baby ostrich banquettes, a design motif of wood slats that lend an almost Scandinavian vibe, an exhibition kitchen in the far back with an eight-seat chef's table, large floral displays, and the plaid carpeting that offers partial relief from the oh-too-common wood floor ricochet effect in most restaurants these days.

The room is definitely lit (there are some large and modern rectangular light boxes), but it's flattering and glowing light, not dark and moody. [Cass Calder Smith](#) was the designer/architect for the refined space, and you may recognize a few small elements or look-and-feel from some of the other places his studio has recently designed, like [Terzo](#) or [Lettus: Café Organic](#). To me, the space feels very Milanese, although the owner, Umberto Gibin, would prefer more of a northerly Torinese association. Let's just say there's nothing quite like it in San Francisco, that's for sure.

The menu is extensive, and pretty darned affordable considering how spiffy the space is-you'd almost expect to cough up more. Yay, you don't have to. There wasn't a single entrée that hit the \$30 mark on my visit, and you still get elegant flatware and stemware, attractive china, and some quality vittles.

Don't try to resist a few selections from the list of salumi (resistance is futile!), because Chef Staffan Terje knows his meats (before his eight years at Scala's, he was also a butcher). He's so into it that he spends his Sundays at the restaurant making salumi. I even got to see his curing room downstairs-it's like the mother lode of meat down there.

Hands-down, the house-cured salame al Barbera is some of the most tender and mouth-melting salame you'll ever taste around town. And how the hell did Terje know I am a total sucker for hot coppa and finocchiona (a fennel salame)? Literally, my two favorites when I'm buying some meat at a deli counter, and there they were on the menu. Hello, babies!

There are also some quality imports on the menu, a mortadella and a riserva prosciutto di San Daniele that's been aged 21 months-it's a rarity, and a must-try. While you're grazing on the salumi, go for a flute of the Lambrusco, the Grasperossa di Castelvetro, Barbolini, Emilia-Romagna (\$8), a winning combo with meatses partses.

I know, salumi, salumi, salumi. It's blowing up around town like sushi or fro-yo many years back. Italians have been scarfing down cured meats for years, but I will say I'm glad Americans have finally caught on.

For those who want to veer away from the fatty cured meats (but why? why!?), there are four crudos to choose from, like a sashimi-style thick-cut blue fin tuna (\$12) (from the Baja) with a nicely acidic green tomato vinaigrette on top plus ribbons of Serrano chile, or exquisitely fresh and succulent Nantucket Bay scallops that are served as a "ceviche," but have barely a whisper of citrus, with thin shards of celery and radish that add extra punch.

Speaking of extra punch, I found both of these dishes desperately needed a hit of salt. Not sure if this was a factor of initial growing pains (the restaurant is brand spanking new), or a purposefully light hand in the kitchen, but either way, both dishes benefited after I gave them a sprinkling (not a spanking). Especially with all the cool salts out there, I think there is an opportunity to showcase some good salts on the crudo selections.

Appetizers deliver on their name—it was tough to choose. We dove into the savory sweetbreads (\$14), sporting a crispy exterior of semolina and fennel pollen, with braised fennel, onion, and a luxurious sauce with truffle. Perfect seasonal dish—hearty flavor and satisfying richness.

Some folks might arch an eyebrow at the prospect of raw veal (vitellone) served like a tartare (\$12), with black truffle and crostini on the side. I found this execution to be a delightful alternative to the classic steak tartare—the meat was hand-cut, and had a creamy, smooth texture, with hints of pink. (Vitellone means "big veal," and the animal is in between the period of being milk-fed and more mature.) While the accompanying crostini were salted, I thought the meat still needed some—without enough salt, it tasted too flat.

The house-made pastas will tempt (and corrupt). The star for me, the Anna Magnani if you will, was the classic Piedmontese dish of agnolotti dal plin (\$12/\$17): plump pillows stuffed with roasted veal breast and Savoy cabbage. This execution featured a trio of cheeses with some melted on top, too. There was ricotta, Parmesan, and Castelmagno cheese, a fluffy yet pungent and tangy cheese I've never had before (we're becoming fast friends). The pasta also had a drizzling of some roasting juices, with that viscous taste and texture you get from slow-roasting with bones—just heaven. Bravo.

This pasta called for a gorgeous glass of red, and boy, did I start flirting heavily with the 2003 Langhe Nebbiolo, Perbacco, Vietti, Piemonte—you could get a glass for \$12, but this is an excellent time to take advantage of Perbacco's quartino feature, a quarter liter for \$16.50 (it's more like a glass and a half, bring it on).

Also on the menu were thick-cut ribbons of house-made pappardelle topped with braised short rib ragu (\$14/\$19) with roasted black and gold chanterelles—the savory sauce had fantastic flavor, and a deep meatiness.

A note on the pasta: it ends up Terje has been working with the same pasta maker for the past eight years, and the guy is a master: complimenti, Donaldo Valenzuela. Seriously. This guy has serious chops. There are other traditional Northern stuffed pastas, like mezzelune and pansotti on the menu—I'm willing to bet that second pasta looks unfamiliar to you, and some things certainly will be strangers (it's okay, you can talk to them). Just ask, the servers expect you to have questions.

For those who want to dabble in the mains, there's a Berkshire pork shoulder braised in milk (\$21) accompanied by polenta and roasted fennel. This dish was homey, and the pork had a lovely texture, but I found it just didn't feature the oomph of some of the other dishes flavor-wise—it's a gentler, milder dish. Even the colors were all somewhat muted on the plate. Personally, I wouldn't want to commit to an entire serving of it on my own, but from what I've heard, people really dig this dish.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, the quartered Wolfe Ranch quail (\$21) was downright colorful, with spicy chunks of persimmon, apple, and a savory jus studded with pomegranate—totally the picture of late fall/early winter. This dish fell more on the contemporary side of things, and I liked the leaves of fresh Italian parsley mixed in with the meat on the plate—it added a nice bite of freshness with the luscious jus.

I was also quaffing a 2004 Barbera d'Asti, Montebruna, Braida Giacomo Bologna, Piemonte (\$14/glass). I learned that Giacomo Bologna is considered the father of Barbera (you will discover that sommelier Mauro Cirilli is happy to educate)—I was reading that Bologna was the first to really maximize the effects of aging Barbera in small oak barrels. Oh, and in case Cirilli looks familiar, he was the lead sommelier at Aqua for almost four years. Be sure to engage him if you can.

So, dessert: pastry chef Tim Nugent (no relationship to Ted) busted out a fantastic chocolate tart (\$8). I don't really opt for "the chocolate" when dining out, but in this case, I'm glad I did. It came with a perfect flaky crust and a decadent swatch of dulce de leche, which the restaurant is charmingly calling "dolci di latte," plus some whipped cream and candied hazelnuts on the side. A refreshing option is the Meyer lemon semifreddo (\$8), a fluffy and chilled cylindrical tower, with candied lemon zest on top. Or, you could always go for some cheese! Mmmm, cheese.

The meal concluded with some complimentary squares of house-made giandua and some torrone—these two flavors totally remind me of Christmas (my grandma always flies us candies and chocolate from Southern Italy for Natale).

I'm sure this place is going to do well, and is destined to become a cool lunchtime spot; my only gripe with the evening hours is that I wish it was open later—it's a sexy space with a bar I'd like to hang out at late, especially with one of their tasty cocktails, like the Dieci, a lovely aperitif with Campari, Tanqueray Ten, and grapefruit (\$9). Oh well.

It's the kind of restaurant that you'll be able to return to again and again, with numerous unique dishes and an extensive and interesting wine list to explore. Couple all that with the gracious staff and the spiffy space, and I'd say people are gonna dig it. Mangia!