

Wine Spectator

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Dining Out | San Francisco

Perbacco

Wine plays a key role at two new crowd-pleasers

BY HARVEY STEIMAN / PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK COMPTON

Perbacco represents a litmus test for serious Italian-food lovers. The food tastes fine at this hot Italian restaurant that opened this past October in San Francisco, and the wine list has much to recommend it. The question isn't one of quality, but of authenticity. If you don't mind the restaurant taking a little poetic license, Perbacco scores big. • The restaurant says it introduces "the full range

of flavors found in the Italian regions of Piemonte and Liguria, with a touch of France by way of Provence." Sounds good. Piemonte, or Piedmont, home to Barolo and Barbaresco, has some of the most sophisticated food in all Italy. Neighboring Liguria isn't far behind.

And some of chef-owner Staffan Terje's dishes were spot-on, especially the various salumi (cured meats), which begin most meals in Piedmont. And *tajarin*, the flat Piedmontese tagliarini, sang a soulful aria with long-cooked pork ragù.

But it says something that Perbacco's best dishes were the most authentic, such as Berkshire pork shoulder *al latte* (even if braising the meat in milk is more of a Bolognese idea). Fish cooked *alla piastra* (on a griddle) vibrated with juiciness against the lemon and artichoke on the plate. Among the desserts, panna cotta quivered at a mere glance and subsided into a puddle in the spoon.

Sometimes, in adapting traditional recipes, Perbacco lost the essence that makes them taste Italian. Why make grissini, the staple dry bread sticks of the Piedmontese table, so rich that they crunch like cheese twists? Ravioli dal plin in Italy are tiny, fingernail-sized, folded-over pockets of meat and cheese. At Perbacco, they were an inch across and came with cabbage. And *carne cruda*? In Italy, it's raw veal scraped onto a plate (or hand-chopped), dressed simply with extra-virgin olive oil and lemon (and white truffles when in season). At Perbacco, the dish contained black-truffle salsa and garlicky aioli.

If you think of the modern, exposed-brick, open-kitchen space in the busy Financial District as a California cuisine restaurant inspired by Italy, these dishes make Perbacco a winner. The wine list, mostly Italian, mostly current vintages, is a plus, too. Of its 150 choices, 25 are available by the glass.

Markups are modest. Among the better deals are Marchesi di Gréy Barbaresco Camp Gros Martinenga 2000 (\$96) and Pio Cesare Barolo 1999 (\$70), Luciano Sandrone Barbera d'Alba 2004 (\$47) and—why not?—Vietti Langhe Perbacco 2003 (\$48),

a Nebbiolo-Barbera blend. Two pages of California wines include gems such as Ramey Chardonnay Napa Valley Carneros Hyde Vineyard 2003, a steal at \$78, and Copain Syrah Mendocino County L'Hiver 2005 (\$40).



At the recently opened Perbacco restaurant, chef-owner Staffan Terje prepares homey Italian dishes, such as a traditional platter of salumi, to go with the mostly Italian wine list.