

ELEVATING THE EVERYDAY

AT FIRST GLANCE, ITALIAN COOKING SEEMS SO SIMPLE. BUT WHILE SIMPLICITY MAY BE THE CUISINE'S CENTRAL TENET, SOME ITALIAN RESTAURANTS ARE UPPING THE ANTE. GISELLE WHITEAKER SAMPLES SUPERB ITALIAN FARE AT STECCA IN LITTLE CHELSEA.



Chef patron Stefano Stecca gives the restaurant its name, and its flair.



I rarely dine out at Italian restaurants. It's not that I don't enjoy the cuisine – quite the contrary. It's more the idea that most Italian dishes are relatively simple to make. The cornerstone of Italian cooking, in fact, is keeping dishes simple – basic, yet flavourful. If I'm going to pay for food, I want it to be something I can't, or won't, make myself.

My friend Katy, though, has her heart set on dining Mediterranean, and we find ourselves in Stecca, a contemporary Italian restaurant in the heart of little Chelsea. The stylish yet casual restaurant created by award-winning Italian chef patron Stefano Stecca has a friendly trattoria vibe, albeit without the red-checked tablecloths and with a lot more contemporary class. White table cloths dress the tables sitting on oak floorboards, with a combination of royal blue and dark wood chairs contrasting with the white walls. A white gauze curtain dotted with twinkling lights covers the main window, and the long, narrow dining area, flanked by a bar and service area, leads back to a small outdoor terrace. There's a secret garden for al fresco dining, but the evening is a little too cool to take advantage of this space.

Patrons trickle in as Katy and I peruse the menu. Stefano Stecca honed his skills in London's Michelin-starred restaurants and luxury hotels, including Zafferano, Rosmarino, Brunello at The Baglioni hotel and TOTO's in Knightsbridge. Here, the cuisine revolves around Italian

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Top: The unassuming exterior of Stecca.
Above: The interior leads to an outdoor terrace and secret garden.
Above right: The interior is simple, yet classy.



Prawn Carpaccio.



Steak tartare.



Pappardelle with duck ragu.



Sicilian Cannoli.

regional and seasonal ingredients, combined with subtle international influences to elevate the dishes beyond the everyday.

The prawn Carpaccio is a prime example. Delicate slices of Sicilian Mazzara Red Prawns are draped across the plate, dappled with sprigs of cress. Each morsel melts in the mouth with a lemony tang. It's simply delightful, but the waiter tells me the light marinade that makes the dish is a secret.

I've ordered the octopus as a test. So often, octopus is a disappointment, charred that fraction too long, so it turns into rubber. Stecca, however, passes the test with flying colours. Large chunks of octopus rest on a creamy chickpea puree, the meat tender, with a hint of charcoal lingering in the mouth. We quickly clean the plate.

We've elected to share our mains, starting with the Fritto Misto di Pesce – a mixture of fried seafood. It's true that most cultures do fried food, and seafood, but Stecca does the combination especially well. The batter is crispy, wrapped around plump scallops, prawns, calamari and red mullet. Stecca comes from Rimini on the Adriatic coast, perhaps explaining his prowess with seafood. It's the simplest of the dishes so far, yet it ticks my boxes. The art of batter is not something I've mastered.

Whether Italians invented pasta is open to debate, but even if they didn't, they certainly own it now. This is where Stecca really comes into its own. The generous portion of pappardelle is al dente'd to perfection. Served with duck ragu and black truffle, the flavour intensity would please Goldilocks – not too rich, not too mild: it's just right.

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Creamy burrata.



"Can we have the Sicilian Cannoli to finish?" I beseech Katy. I'm a convert to the Italian tubular pastry packed with ricotta, after an introduction on a food tour in Rome. "And how about the Affogato?" asks Katy. "Oh no," the waiter interjects. "You can have Affogato anywhere. You must try the Crema Marscapone."

The trio of Cannoli tubes is presented on a slate platter, the pastry bookended with crushed green pistachios and dusted with icing sugar. The shell gives a satisfying crunch, making way for the creamy sweet ricotta.

The Crema Marscapone is something else. Served in a square glass bowl, sprinkled with cocoa, the yellow pudding looks ordinary. Uninspired even. Katy digs a spoon in and ferries it to her mouth. Her eyes light up. "It's like custard's creamier, sweeter cousin," she explains, helping herself to more.

Washing the repast down with a limoncello on the house, I'm forced to re-think Italian cuisine. Perhaps its simplicity is what makes it a challenge. It takes a certain savoir faire to return to the basics - fresh produce - and transform them into a dish with flavour and flair.

There is an old Italian adage - *a tavola non si invecchia* - at the table, one does not grow old. Perhaps that's why we depart Stecca with a certain spring in our step. ■



Top: Octopus and creamy chickpea puree.
Left: Ravioli.

INFO

For more information about Stecca, or to make a booking, see www.stecca.co.uk

HERE ARE SOME OF OUR OTHER ITALIAN FAVOURITES



Falmouth

A little slice of authentic Italy, Mangia serves home-made pasta in dishes like Tagliatelle with King Prawns and Mussels, and pizza from the wood-fired pizza oven, ranging from a subtle Margherita to the colourful Casareccia.
www.mangia.uk



Chiswick

Villa Di Geggiano is the authentic taste of Tuscany in London. Head chef Emanuele Morisi, formerly of Assaggi creates dishes inspired by the region's rich and abundant cuisine, with highlights including La Bistecca Alla Fiorentina and Le Salsicce Toscane.
www.villadigeggiano.co.uk



Peatzzeria, situated in Bowmore overlooking stunning Lochindaal in Scotland, dishes up pizzas using some locally sourced Islay food produce. The specialty seafood pizza has Islay lobster, scallops and Bradan Rost lounging on top of a delightful pizza base.
www.peatzeria.com

STECCA'S LOBSTER TAGLIOLINI



METHOD

Finley chop the garlic and chilli and place in a pan with some olive oil. When the garlic is golden, add chopped tomatoes. Cook for 2 minutes and then add the lobster meat and splash with the brandy. Cook for 3-4 minutes and then add the cooked pasta and mix together.

For fresh pasta, stir flour and eggs in a food processor for about 10 minutes to create the dough. Remove from the processor and wrap in cling film and leave to rest for one hour.

Fold a piece of dough into the pasta machine about 8-10 times, starting from a wider setting to a tighter setting. After obtaining long sheets, fold them and cut them into strips of about 4 mm wide.

Cook the tagliolini in boiling water for 3 minutes.

Add the pasta to the sauce and mix in the pan before serving.

INGREDIENTS

Sauce

- 1 clove of garlic
- Half a sweet chilli
- 200 gr Lobster meat
- 50 gr cherry tomato
- Parsley
- 10ml Brandy
- Olive oil TAMIA

Pasta dough

- 500 gr flour Tipo '00'
- 3 eggs