

Cafe Atlantico is only getting better with age menu has changed, but the Italian fare is simply delicious

By ALAN AUSTIN Special to the *Times-Union*

According to Virginia Woolf, "One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well."

Yes, Virginia, each and every one of us loves eating well. The only problem is where. Cafe Atlantico is one place to keep in mind. For the past five years, this small restaurant, in an easy-to-miss little white house, has been almost an insider's secret as to where to go for a gourmet dinner in St. Augustine.

I say almost a secret, because since I first reviewed it in February 2001, it has earned recognition with a number of awards and high marks, including the Golden Spoon Award and Mobil's three-diamond rating. Chef and proprietor Paolo Pece was also a semi-finalist in this year's Italian Culinary Institute's competition in New York.

My previous review of Cafe Atlantico ended by stating that like a fine young wine, time would only make it better. Now, four years later I returned, ready to eat my words if my prophecy had not come true.

Paolo Pece is the chef-owner of Cafe Atlantico, an intimate Italian restaurant in St. Augustine Beach.

By BOB MACK / *The Times-Union*

Inside were the same 10 white tablecloth-covered tables and modern paintings on the walls. And just like before, warm, fresh, crusty Italian bread, with first-press olive oil to dip it in, and a plate of plump green and black garlic-flecked olives were brought to help keep the appetite at bay.

The menu, however, was completely different. The server said it changes monthly. Normally that's very laudable, showing that the chef is both inspired by seasonal ingredients and not afraid to try new recipes, but infrequent visitors risk not finding their favorites. In my case, it was the Lobster Ravioli in Bechamel Sauce that I liked so much before.

Like the number of tables, the menu is limited to no more than what one chef can handle: five appetizers and eight entrees.

Carpaccio di Tonno (\$9) -- tuna carpaccio -- was my first choice. Delicate almost to a fault, sushi grade tuna is at its best sliced thin, given a little kick by capers and creamy lemon sauce.

On my first visit, fennel flavored a salad of field greens with melon and mozzarella. This time, it reared its beautiful head braised in Capesante Brasate (\$8) -- pan-seared deep sea scallops -- on a mirror of yellow pepper infusion.

Another appetizer was closer to classic: Cozze Ripiene (\$8) -- a half-dozen New Zealand mussels on the half-shell -- poached in a broth of fresh tomato and overflowing with Parmesan, garlic and bread crumbs.

Honorable mention goes to Frittura di Calamari (\$7) -- floured and lightly fried baby squid served with marinara. It was quintessentially Italian, but beguilingly simple.

The word "gourmet," mentioned earlier, connotes different things for different people. For some, it's elaborate experimentation; for others, novelty and everyone admires originality. But today's philosophy of cooking worships simplicity.

Take Brodetto Posillipo (\$19) -- a melding of many aromas to make a unified taste: a simple bouillabaisse of shrimp, scallops, calamari, clams and mussels, Italianized by sun ripe tomatoes in the broth. It was a bit of heaven served over angel hair pasta.

Sharply simple was Linguine al Gamberi Piccanti (\$16) -- fresh-caught local shrimp sautéed with chili peppers and garlic, over linguine.

Complicated only in the cooking, but simple in concept was Branzino al Cartoccio (\$21): Chilean sea bass, shrimp and mussels, first briefly poached in a creamy caper-flavored reduction, then finished baking in its own juices, wrapped in foil.

Then there was my rack of lamb, Costolette d'Agnello Scottadito (\$22): six medium rare baby chops arrayed around a section of chevre on a rosemary emulsion. It all rested on spinach fettuccine tossed with classic aglio e olio (garlic and oil), ringed by baby carrots and squash.

Costoletta di Maiale Campagnola (\$18) -- country-style pork chop -- was topped with green peppers and mushrooms, served not with pasta, but over whipped potatoes.

And it should go without saying that wherever pasta was served, it was al dente. And absolutely worth mentioning is Fettuccine Absolut (\$16), seafood and Absolut vodka emulsion with lemon zest, over fettuccine, and Linguine Nero di Sepia (\$17), linguine laced with a Pinot Grigio reduction with squid ink.

There were three desserts (\$6, each): Torta Caprese, thick and rich flourless black chocolate almond cake named for the Isle of Capri; Panna Cotta, with natural gelatin binding the flavors of sweet Marsala wine, milk, cream and vanilla; and Tiramisu, which was an eye-opener that really lived up to its name meaning "pick me up."

The wine list features some basic Italian wines no one else seems to stock. There's white Orvieto (\$6 glass, \$26 bottle), and by the bottle only, fresh tasting and much less serious than its name implies, Lacryma Cristi (\$30) -- "Tears of Christ" -- grown on the volcanic slopes of Mount Vesuvius. Some of the most distinguished Italian reds are represented with prices to match -- Brunello, Barolo, Amarone -- \$68, \$62, \$60. No Italian grape packs more flavor than the Sangiovese, and its force majeure can be unleashed by the glass in di Majo Norante (\$7, \$28).

Cucina Italiana is the real thing in St. Augustine Beach

By Catherine Enns Grigas

Among the dishes served at the restaurant is Fennel Cured Atlantic Salmon Carpaccio. Italian food, despite being widely loved in the United States, is also misunderstood. It's not all pizza and spaghetti.

For cuisine that climbs as high as a cliffside road on the Amalfi coast, there's Café Atlantico, a tiny restaurant on St. Augustine Beach, Florida. Chef-owner Paolo Pece hails from Naples and his cucina Italiana is the real thing – minus, of course, the Mediterranean setting. St. Augustine, though, is reminiscent of his old home and that's why he settled there.

“The proximity to the ocean and the charm of the city reminded me of where I grew up,” he says.

His own ristorante is a simple place, an inconspicuous building across from the ocean on A1A Beach Boulevard. Inside, there's room for just 13 tables, but the white walls and contemporary paintings and sculpture give the place a serene feeling, even when it's full of diners whose conversations seem to inevitably turn to Under the Tuscan Sun topics.

Cafe Atlantico 646 A1A Beach Blvd. St. Augustine Beach, Florida (904) 471-7332 Hours: 5 to 10 p.m. Monday through Saturday

To enjoy Catherine's review in its entirety – as well as Paolo's recipe for Fennel Cured Atlantic Salmon Carpaccio, pick up a copy of the March/April issue of Water's Edge. It's available at your favorite newsstand, or by ordering online now.

To find out what Paolo can specially prepare for you, contact Paolo at:
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