

Los Angeles Times

May 6, 2010

★★★

The Review: Valentino

A new chef has breathed southern Italian life into Piero Selvaggio's Santa Monica institution.



Chocolate fettuccine with lobster ragu. (Francine Orr / Los Angeles Times)

By S. Irene Virbila, Los Angeles Times Restaurant Critic

Valentino is back.

I know, I didn't quite believe it myself. But I kept hearing that the cooking was good again — and not just from die-hard fans who have retained a deep affection for the 38-year-old restaurant despite all the recent ups and mostly downs. And it turns out they were right. The new chef, Nicola Chessa, who took over in January, is cooking some of the best food I've had at Valentino in years.

Valentino, once undisputedly Southern California's ruling Italian restaurant, opened in 1972 in the era of bell bottoms and purple jumpsuits. Through the years, owner Piero Selvaggio turned the mediocre restaurant where he'd worked as a waiter into an icon of Italian cuisine with name recognition even in Italy.

In recent years, though, the kitchen had become a revolving door for young Italian chefs intent mostly, it seemed, on emblazoning the Valentino name on their résumés. Few stayed very long before moving on.

At one point Selvaggio had to invite his former executive chef back from Sacramento to cook on the weekends.

I sincerely hope he doesn't have the same problem with Chessa, because the Sardinian-born chef is a natural for Valentino. First of all, he comes from the south of Italy and it's the south now, not the north, which is home to the most exciting cooking on the peninsula.

But Chessa didn't just arrive from the old country yesterday: He comes to Santa Monica by way of Las Vegas, where he was executive chef at Giorgio Ristorante, Selvaggio's casual Vegas cafe. In fact, the chef has worked with the Valentino Restaurant Group for a decade. (In addition to a Valentino in Las Vegas, Selvaggio also has Valentino Vin Bar in Houston.)

Chessa has updated the menu at the Santa Monica restaurant with some welcome Sardinian touches. The flavors of the Italian island's rustic cuisine show up in the appetizer of tuna salad on *fregula*, or Sardinian couscous. The tiny pasta balls the size of new peas are a wonderful textural contrast with the plush raw tuna sparked with a Tarocco blood orange dressing that has just a hint of ginger.

But you taste Sardinia — and the sea — most of all in the *bottarga* (dried, pressed mullet roe) Chessa uses to garnish many dishes. Russet in color, the dried roe has a strong, briny flavor, best shaved over a dish to give the rich funk of ocean. For some, it's an acquired taste; for others (and I count myself among them), it's an obsession.

It really feels wonderful to be back dining at this venerable restaurant. Not many other places have lasted 38 years. Most of the staff has been there for years, including the gentle maitre d' Giuseppe Mollica and sommelier Paul Sherman.

Selvaggio is a brilliant host. And no, I'm not anonymous here because I'd known Selvaggio as an interview source long before I ever thought about becoming a restaurant critic; I did, though, make all of my reservations under other names in order to put off recognition as long as possible. On recent visits, he has been in good form, excited to present his latest Italian wine discoveries, including a dry, complex white made with the indigenous Grillo grape from Sicily.

We go, of course, for the tasting menu, which has always been the best strategy at Valentino. However, I have to say, the a la carte menu is looking better these days too, stripped down to one page of essentials — fusilli alla Norma, *garganelli* with Bolognese ragú, veal ossobuco, etc. That's OK if you're not much of an adventurous eater.

For those who are, the real interest is in the chef's specials offered as a tasting menu, either three courses for \$55 or four for \$70. Wine pairings are \$50 per person more, ideal if you're just a couple and want to have more than one wine with your dinner.

The dry, minerally character of the Grillo works well with the antipasti, each just a few bites: translucent slices of lamb prosciutto draped over honey-sweetened ricotta, strips of sweet peppers fried in basil oil, that tuna and *fregula* salad, and a simple wedge of sheep's milk ricotta baked and perfumed with thyme.

On another visit, we get a plate of *crudo di pesce* (raw fish) drizzled with *colatura di alici* (a sort of anchovy essence) and a lobster salad with fennel and slices of lightly smoked gray mullet garnished with *bottarga* shavings.

But all that is trumped by the pasta courses, which often turn out to be a tasting within a tasting. Pasta is where Chessa shines. His cooking is understated and very Italian, lightly sauced, lightly seasoned.

One night, a stubby dried pasta called *mezze maniche*, or "half sleeve" in Italian, is tossed with the freshest calamari, clams and prawns with *bottarga* shaved over. It's stunning and really tastes like something you'd eat on the Amalfi Coast.

I love the fettuccine flavored with the famous chocolate from Modica in Sicily, served with luscious Santa Barbara prawns. Spaghetti *cipollato*, with *guanciale*, onions, Romanesco broccoli and pecorino is something I could eat every day.

On another visit, dainty Piedmontese *agnolotti* are tossed in butter and sage, and little ravioli are stuffed with either buffalo ricotta and fava beans or with sweetbreads and pancetta

With the ravioli, we have a Barbera from Roero in Piemonte. Lush and dark in tone, it goes down like velvet. You can find all sorts of bottles like this on Valentino's impressive wine list, which encompasses thousands of selections.

Sure, he's got all the big guns — Gaja and Bruno Giacosa, Giacomo Conterno's Monfortino and seemingly endless Sassacaia. But Selvaggio has always championed up-and-coming winemakers too, and especially those from the south of Italy.

He's bought the wines, offered encouragement and stood by young winemakers as they found their way. And while the prices aren't as inexpensive as they once were, you can still find relative bargains among the up-and-coming generation of winemakers on the Italian peninsula. Even Sardinia.

Luckily, there are plenty of main courses conceived with wine in mind. One beautiful dish is quail cooked in Vecchio Samperi Marsala, an aged Marsala from De Bartoli that gives the quail a marvelous depth.

Braised veal cheeks with lentils from Castelluccio in Umbria works well with a Sangiovese. So does the tender lamb with olives, fennel and potatoes.

And instead of a boring veal chop, Chessa serves a flavorful veal loin wrapped in pancetta to give it a smoky edge and, again, cooked in that aged Marsala.

Pastry chef Davide Giova does his best to elevate the dessert course. It's not easy — by the time you get to dessert, most people have filled up on the antipasti and *primi*. What's needed is something light, such as Giova's take on tiramisu, a fluffy lemon cake with the merest hint of mascarpone. He makes a lovely vanilla pudding too, served with baby *cantucci* cookies.

My favorites? His *cassata*, the typical sponge cake layered with ricotta and decorated with candied fruit and chocolate. And who could resist the miniature cannoli? I was just in Sicily in October, and these really do taste like the ones I ate there.

The food is not the only thing that's been freshened up. Gone are the pillars in front that made Valentino look like Pompeii at Vegas. Gone, too, the tacky cutout mirrors and lavender curtains. Now the decor resembles that of a mid-level business hotel in Italy, sober and plain. It could be worse. And once was.

Now I once again look forward to going to Valentino. With Chessa heading up the kitchen and Selvaggio in good form, the flagship has got its groove back.

What a delight that is for those of us who over the years have enjoyed sitting for hours in Valentino's dining room savoring Italian cuisine and astonishing Italian wines.

Valentino

Rating: three stars

Location: 3115 Pico Blvd., Santa Monica; (310) 829-4313; <http://www.valentinorestaurantgroup.com>

Price: Appetizers, \$12 to \$15; primi, \$19 to \$24; main courses, \$28 to \$44; sides, \$10; three-course tasting menu, \$55 per person; four-course tasting menu, \$70 per person. Wine pairing, add \$50 per person more. Corkage fee, \$30 (one bottle waived for every bottle purchased).

Details: Open for dinner 5 to 10 p.m. Tuesdays to Thursdays, 5 to 10:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, and for lunch only at 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Fridays. Full bar. Valet parking, \$5.50.

Rating is based on food, service and ambience, with price taken into account in relation to quality. Four stars: Outstanding on every level. Three stars: Excellent. Two stars: Very good. One star: Good. No star: Poor to satisfactory.