

THE AUSTRALIAN

Osteria di Russo & Russo's Jason Saxby ticks every box

JOHN LETHLEAN THE AUSTRALIAN SEPTEMBER 07, 2013 12:00AM



Osteria di Russo & Russo is cute, and, with its family pics on the wall, a modern iteration of the red gingham Italian.

Osteria di Russo & Russo (<http://russoandrusso.net.au>), Sydney

Rating: 4 out of 5

SHOULD the critic go out hungry? On one hand, you should approach the experience with genuine desire and open mind. On the other, a serious appetite can blunt the reviewing blade.

The answer? Go hungry, but not so much as to be grateful for almost anything. You might say the same for research: a little is good; too much colours expectation. The point? I got to Russo very hungry (#Qantasdelays) and under-researched. There'd been talk of the new place in Enmore with an Italian name; I was really ready for red sauce and mozzarella. Wrong.

Russo, the restaurant, is cute, modest and, with its family pics on the wall, white marble tables and black marble bar for dining, a modern iteration of the red gingham Italian. That's where any parallel with the scaloppine joints of your youth ends. Italian flavours and ingredients are a springboard, but Jason Saxby, in his first head chef gig, has reached a delightful accord with boss and front-of-house master Marc Russo: make it Italian, but not; make it unpredictable; make it modern.

Saxby ticks every box. He has a CV to die for (Quay, Pilu, The Ledbury, Per Se) and,

tellingly, met Russo at Sydney's excellent Bridge Room.

Take away the Asian flavours, give the beast an Italian transplant, and you have a clue to Saxby's complex yet wonderfully satisfying modern food. He uses textural elements - grains, puffed or otherwise, rye crumbs, fried vegetable matter - to balance mouthfeel, provide interest. And lots of balancing acids, such as balsamic, citrus and verjuice, to scupper dish fatigue.

Case in point? A winter salad of salt-roasted golden beet, baby beets and fried beetroot chips gets a champagne vinegar/golden beet emulsion dressing, balsamic-roasted rye crumbs, white radicchio, ruby grapefruit pieces and pomegranate.

It's eclipsed by a crazy-looking plate of crisp-shelled octopus - slow-poached in oil, chargrilled to order - with fine fronds of sopressa salami, black olive puree, spiced caper "crumbs" and eggplant caponata, an underlying smear of sweet/sour red wine/vinegar reduction on the plate. Memorable.

And on it goes: the Jerusalem artichoke risotto is creamy, light and finished with truffled pecorino and fried artichoke crisps; another textural buzz. For \$15, the chef will magically appear at your table to grate truffle. Spend it.

Pasta "worms" - lombrichi - are made with cocoa in the dough, a salute to the boar ragu they're smothered in that's made with ham hock stock. Beetroot, cavolo nero and coffee-roasted hazelnuts balance the meat; the plate is dusted with dehydrated beetroot powder, garnished with a bitter green he calls red lace.

Roasted duck combines with fine slices of guanciale (cured pork), sliced confit/charred king brown mushroom, nettle - pureed and fried - balsamic prunes and brown butter-puffed spelt, like popcorn, to create another wonderfully chaotic plate of food that is utterly entertaining, harmonious and well-conceived.

No space to talk desserts: suffice to say they are complex without being fussy, and demonstrate maturity, technical skill and creativity. Soft/crunchy elements, more grains and nuts, simpatico flavour combinations, fruity/acid surprises ... The cosy Russo sells all this in a delightfully unpretentious manner. Even the wine's good value.



Crisp shelled octopus, from Osteria di Russo & Russo. Picture: Julian Kingma Source: TheAustralian

It's been called a neighbourhood restaurant. I disagree. The mood is right, the pitch perfect and the chef on some kind of trajectory. Right now could be one of those "remember when he was in Enmore" moments. Go hungry.

Osteria di Russo & Russo (<http://russoandrusso.net.au>), 158 Enmore Road, Enmore, NSW, (02) 8068 5202

Hours: Dinner Wed-Sun

Typical prices: Smaller \$18; medium \$28; desserts \$16; set menu: five-course \$50; seven-course \$65

Summary: Surprising, hospitable, fun. One to watch

Like this? Try: Sarti, Melbourne; Ortiga, Brisbane

Rating: 4 out of 5