

## Restaurant Review: Oakland's Marzano

Southern Italian eatery goes light on pocketbook, smooth on stomach  
(Three out of four stars)

By Jessica Yadegaran  
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Growing up, my Persian mother occasionally eschewed the elaborate, herb-stewed and rosewater-kissed dishes we were accustomed to eating in exchange for what my sister, father and I came to call "chicken-something-or-other."

Unappreciative and spoiled, we snickered as she decorated legs with pineapple rings and Saucy Susan. We turned up our noses the nights she covered breasts in cream of mushroom soup. And we yawned when she coated them in egg and bread crumbs and fried-up schnitzel.

These dishes tasted fine. But to our ethnic palates, the bland bird just didn't excite. However, after a recent trip to Marzano, the new southern Italian bistro in Oakland, I'm eliminating bird-bashing from my vocabulary forever.

In a singular dish, Wood Oven Braised Chicken All' Arrabbiata (\$14), chef Robert Holt has inspired a chicken movement. Holt, who grew his own wings cooking with Joyce Goldstein at Square One Restaurant and preparing sauces at Boulevard, builds the layers of this boisterous sauce — arrabbiata is Italian for angry — with onions, tomatoes and at least five peppers, including Calabrian chiles and pickled cherry peppers.

He says he adds the oil and pickled juices that the latter chiles are packed in and sears off a thigh, leg and breast — dark and white meats add an extra dimension of flavor — with red wine vinegar, which tenderizes the chicken.

Then he hits the whole thing with tomato paste and white wine and braises the chicken for an hour in the wood oven. It arrives in a shallow clay pot smelling of sweet marjoram. The first bite elicits a "Wow" from my boyfriend. As he dipped warm, homemade flat bread in the dish, Joel ranked its heat and power at a red curry. So be prepared, it is spicy.

But it's also honest and alive and everything I would image Sicilian cooking to be. So is the décor and ambience of the restaurant, which sits on a quiet corner of the Glenview district, a few doors down from Bellanico, another regional Italian hub.

Inside, there are wood tables for two or four and a communal table made of old Russian barn wood that looks onto Park Boulevard. Large bulbous lights lining the bar are made from old Italian wine spheres. The candelabras hanging from the high ceiling are made from French wine barrels.

That's it, save for a few oversized mirrors and some stacked tomato cans. The focus at Marzano, which opened six weeks ago and was packed on my visits, is not about frill. It's

about simple, recession-friendly fine dining. They have created a small, focused menu with nothing on it over \$15.

Neapolitan pizzas are the specialty, and there are 10 to choose from. We were delighted with the oval and oily Winter Pie (\$12): pillow-soft squares of roasted pumpkin, puffs of ricotta, crispy pancetta and cavolo nero, or black leaf kale, on walnut pesto.

Marzano's staff is certified with Verace Pizza Napoletana Association (few Bay Area restaurants are) to make Naples-style pizza, and co-owner Justin Hafen tells me that the perfect crust — thin and crisp on the outside, warm and soft inside — has to do with the water chemistry. They use filtered.

"It contributes to the flavor, aroma and texture of the dough," he says.

On both of my visits, Hafen, who co-owns Garibaldi's and Marzano with his partner, John Hurley, was manning the reservation desk, handing out to-go orders and chatting up customers who appeared to be regulars. The entire staff was knowledgeable and friendly, with an air of respect and professionalism too often reserved for white tablecloth establishments.

For instance, the wine list, an arrangement of eclectic indigenous Italian varietals, left me full of geeky questions. When our waitress couldn't answer them, she called over general manager Morgan Schick, a Garibaldi's veteran, who answered all the oak and body minutiae I required.

Based on his inspired description, I settled on a glass of 2007 Donnafugata Ansonica (\$7). Something about tasting "full and sun-drenched." He was right; it was crisp yet round and lively and even stood up to the spicy chicken. If you're thinking about bringing your own wine, don't. Marzano charges \$20 corkage, so ordering off the list makes much more sense. No glass is more than \$10 and the priciest bottle is \$50.

Our waitress also helped us narrow down dishes we ordered, including starters. The House Cured Monterey Bay Sardines (\$8) again showcases Holt's affinity for bold flavors.

Here, it's brine that meets juicy sweetness: four fresh sardines hug satsuma mandarins, toasted almonds, saffron-tinged golden raisins and giardiniera, or pickled vegetables. It was a lovely dish and stoked our appetites for the Crisp Fried Chestnut Pumpkin Arancini (\$8).

Holt, an avid traveler to Sicily, recalls these fried risotto balls with fondness. His version of the street food is stuffed with fontina and prosciutto and celebrates fall. He adds sage and cinnamon to the risotto and coats it in pumpkin purée. On the inside, arancini has the visual appeal of creamed corn. But equal parts sweet, salt and crunch leave you unmistakably comforted.

Our only disappointment was dessert. The Capri Style Chocolate & Almond Tort (\$8) is a dense, Cheesecake Factory-sized portion of chocolate and so many almonds I thought I was eating a fattier nut, like walnuts. It's not that the flourless tort wasn't tasty, but it just didn't meld with Marzano's menu. Neither did the chocolate and vanilla Soft Serve Gelato (\$3), which wasn't gelato but an ice cream base from Bi-Rite Creamery run through a soft serve machine.

But, to Marzano's credit, they don't have a pastry chef and I don't expect them to focus on dessert. How can you when you're busy starting a chicken revolution?