



RESTAURANT REVIEW

Italian cooking that dazzles

By Bao Ong
RESTAURANT CRITIC

Two ubiquitous menu items — tuna crudo and spaghetti with tomato sauce — convinced me that Osteria di Mercato is one of Houston’s best Italian restaurants. On a first visit, about a month after the West University Place spot opened, the crudo stopped my dining companion and me mid-bite. Our eyes widened. We paused and nodded in unison. Without saying anything, we shared the same thought: “If the rest of the meal is this good...” Neither of us was shy about ladling up the last of the fatty cubes of tuna bathing in a pool of ginger brodo. We

Osteria di Mercato is an ambitious spot in West University Place serving polished, seasonal fare

lingered over each spoonful of the raw fish with bites of Granny Smith apples, cut into half-inch rings and layered on top like perfectly placed mosaic tiles. Executive chef Mauricio Alvarado described the acid from the apples and a squiggle of citrus oil as a palate cleanser of sorts, ahead of the richer pasta courses. He was right. As I twirled the last strands of spaghetti alla chitarra on my fork, I admired the dish’s simplicity: The house-made pasta wasn’t drowning in pomodoro sauce or too-sweet marinara. Confit Sun Gold tomatoes, which had been simmering in olive oil and butter, burst open and

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Top row, from left: Spaghetti alla chitarra served at Osteria di Mercato; Bistecca al pepe nero. Middle row, from left: Tonno crudo; pomodori e caviar; melon with ginger chantilly. Bottom row, from left: Scarpinocc filled with smoked ricotta and spinach; branzino for two.

Photos by Elizabeth Conley/Houston Chronicle

HRW sees orders rise under new donation structure

By Aviva Bechky
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Houston Restaurant Weeks will launch Saturday, setting off 38 days of deals at restaurants across the city. The event is both the biggest annual fundraiser for the Houston Food Bank and a major booster for many local restaurants, for whom August is traditionally the slowest month of the year. Participating restaurants offer multicourse, set-menu meals and donate a por-

tion of the proceeds from each sale. Recently, however, the restaurant industry has been hard-hit by a barrage of problems: People are eating out less. Some of them drink less. Food costs went up. Hiring became harder. And it’s often a struggle for restaurants to create a menu that brings in enough money for them to make a profit and make a donation, while still offering a bargain to diners. So in an attempt to support them, HRW changed



Brennan’s of Houston was a top donor restaurant for Houston Restaurant Weeks last year.

its donation structure last year. It will maintain the changes for 2026. Here’s a look at what changed and how it’s impacted restaurants. **Why make a change?** During HRW, restaurants agree to offer set-price meals for \$25, \$39 or \$55. Historically, for each meal sold, they would donate \$3, \$5 or \$7 to the food bank, depending on the cost of the meal. Last year, though, the restaurant industry in Houston faced a crisis. Restaurants all over the city were closing down. So HRW changed its expected donation. Instead of requesting \$3, \$5 or \$7 per meal, it asked for \$1, \$3 or \$5. “That \$3 and \$5 and \$7 donation structure just wasn’t fitting for the time that we’re in,” said Katie Stone, who leads HRW as president of the Cleverley Stone Foundation. “When we changed it last year, we kind of had the feeling that this is where we’re going to be for a few

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