

# A Roman Repast at Giacomo's Cibo e Vino

By Joanna O'Leary Wed., May 30 2012 at 10:00 AM

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Photo by Joanna O'Leary.

A rosy baked tomato, stuffed with risotto and wearing a jaunty cap.

When I told my husband I wanted to go to the May Roman Feast at Giacomo's Cibo e Vino, he responded:

"Will there be a vomitorium?"\*

"Good God, I hope not," I said. "Though its presence might actually suggest people were really enjoying the food."

And they were. Light tones and merry laughter circulated around the dining room on the breezy Thursday evening we visited. I'm not usually one to be infected by ambient enthusiasm, but I couldn't help but feel festive that night, especially when the *cicchetti* started arriving.

\*Apparently a myth, anyway.

Each was a little masterpiece served in its own earthenware dish. We began with the *Pomodori a Riso*, baked tomatoes bursting with risotto. Considering Chef Lynette Hawkins prepares the risotto in small batches before hand-stuffing the tomatoes, this seemingly simple dish (priced at only \$5) requires rather painstaking preparation, which is evident in the more subtle herb flavors of the grain filling and delicate texture of the enveloping fruit.

During an earlier excursion to Giacomo's, I learned these little dishes are similar to tapas, meant to be eaten leisurely over a glass of wine or bottle of Peroni. A fine practice, to be sure, but try nibbling "leisurely" at delicious food when you're hungry. The *carciofi alla romana* was thus especially challenging, for if there's one thing my grandmother taught me, it's that stuffing a whole braised artichoke into your gullet does not help your social status or your digestive system. For slowly stripping the artichoke leaf by leaf, I was rewarded with the rich tastes of olive oil, basil, lemon, white wine and shallots mingling in my mouth with the barest hint of fibrous flower.



Photo by Joanna O'Leary.

The only thing more enjoyable than stripping the leaves is savoring the heart inside.

I might have spent an hour on that artichoke if I didn't have to move on to gnocchi, which my husband was threatening to devour all by himself.



Photo by Joanna O'Leary.

Gnocchi alla Romana.

Readers of my previous posts know I have *this thing* for gnocchi, which I often refer to as "pasta pillows from heaven." Hawkins's gnocchi are cut larger and thicker than your standard gnocchi and benefit from a higher semolina content that provides softer, grainier texture. Apparently, Chef Hawkins has fond memories of her mother preparing gnocchi for her when she was sick and was inspired to put it on the Feast menu to represent a "comfort food" of her childhood.

Um, when I was sick, my mom and dad opened a can of Campbell's, turned on the television and handed me a juicebox. No bitterness here. ANYWAY, readers will be happy to know that the gnocchi alla romana, so popular during the Feast, has earned a permanent place on Giacomo's menu.



Photo by Joanna O'Leary.

Spaghetti alla Carbonara, so popular it's migrating to the regular menu.

Our competition to eat all the *cicchetti* was interrupted (fortunately) by the arrival of the main courses. We ordered a mix of half and whole portions to increase variety without wasting food, but I easily could have consumed a double order of the Feast's featured entrée, spaghetti carbonara. *Yawn*, I hear you say. Yes, yes, I know everyone and their dog makes carbonara these days thanks to all the simplified versions showcased on *Good Morning America* via three-minute segments with Mario Batali. I myself have slapped together noodles, eggs, pancetta (or bacon), olive oil, cheese and garlic at home for a quick dinner.

However, a fine and, perhaps more important, traditional carbonara requires not just any cured meat but *guanciale* (pork jowl), which adds an earthy robustness you can't get using regular old bacon or pancetta. Hawkins's carbonara is also heavy on the black pepper and pecorino romano and lighter on the parsley, making for thicker, pleasantly uneven coils of pasta laced with clumps of cheese.



Photo by Joanna O'Leary.

Glorious half-moons stuffed with goat cheese and chard in a sage butter sauce.

Sharing is caring (or so I'm told), so I laid off the carbonara momentarily and switched to the *tagliatelle alla bolognese* and *tortelli di bietola*. Both are signature *secondi* at Giacomo's, and for good reason. The *tagliatelle* satisfies the "where's the beef?" diner with a strong but not overpowering meat sauce, and the *tortelli* are a natural draw for Houstonians craving something spicy. And when I say spicy, I'm not referring to the heat factor, but the exceptionally strong taste of sage. (This is a good thing, folks, and may I be the first to predict that sage is the new cinnamon?) Each tortello is filled with goat cheese and swiss chard, which together add a botanical creaminess that wonderfully complements the rich sage butter sauce.



Photo by Joanna O'Leary.

1 Panna Cotta + 2 Spoons = Reluctant Co-Consumption

Dessert usually seems anticlimatic after such a colorful meal, but the panna cotta caught my attention with its strong notes of citrus amongst the firm cream base. Not so much your traditional panna cotta, but a perfectly refreshing end to the Feast.

The Roman Holiday Feast concludes at the end of May, but, as I have noted, the gnocchi alla romana and carbonara have been added to the permanent menu.