

Forma Italian restaurant and cheese bar debuts in Santa Monica

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Forma Italian restaurant

We were half-a-dozen courses into our tasting menu when the pasta-tossing show began at Forma, the newest Italian restaurant entry on Santa Monica's coolest Street, Montana Avenue.

On a long table at the back of the dining room, magnificent hollowed out cheese wheels--Parmesan, grand cru sheep's milk Romano and a couple of other aged hard styles--were lined up like soldiers. In one, a sous chef tossed perfectly al dente spaghetti with freshly cracked pepper as if mixing up salad. The chewy pasta strands picked up the cheese's nutty richness like a magnet.

The house calls this act of showmanship Dalla Forma service and it includes pasta specialties like plump little tortellini tossed in the Bella Lodi grana cheese and rigatoni

carbonara which gets mixed up in the pecorino Romano wheel. The various noodle styles, meticulously matched to a specific cheese, show a sophisticated attention to detail.

IT HAS THE LOOK

The transformation of Forma's space has been pretty astounding. Built on the bones of the long time neighborhood favorite, 17th Street Café and its short lived successor Jack's on Montana, the room is now totally glammed up with a gleaming white Carrera marble wine and cheese bar stretching along the east side of the restaurant. The opposite wall, sheathed in sexy-looking padded leather, slants slightly inward, giving the room a Bruno Cuccinelli-style luxuriously casual feel.

Chef Piero Topputo and partner, manager Mario Sabatini are both longtime veterans of the L.A. Italian restaurant scene-- including stints at Toscana in Brentwood. Their impressively large pan-European cheese selection includes creamy Spanish blue, Cabrales and gooey rind-washed French Epoisses among other delicious specimens. The Cheese and wine bar adds to Forma's versatility: It's the kind of place where you can hang out with a glass of wine (or craft beer or wine flight) along with a cheese or salumi board or you can dine on a more complete meal.

MORE DISHES:

While the Dalla Forma pastas are the restaurant's showstoppers, the menu travels deeply into rustic Italian fare territory--Chef Topputo is from Puglia, a hot culinary destination at the moment. I'm happy to say his menu includes lots of artichokes. Crisply roasted, they top lightly fried filet of sole or they're baked with sliced fennel under a puffy blanket of Spanish Manchego. Alpine Raclette cheese makes an appearance melted over roasted cauliflorettes. More braised baby artichokes top deliciously light chicken meatballs in a saucy puddle of intense broth.

Right now the restaurant serves dinner and lunch (a good time to sample the pulled roast pork sandwich). Eventually they'll open throughout the day and evening. It's a plan that suits this buzzy neighborhood as well as a cheese bar and pasta tossed Dalla Forma style.

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