

The Oregonian

APRIL 21, 2006

diner

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Nostrana: Restaurant of the Year

By KAREN BROOKS
THE OREGONIAN

Cathy Whims zooms around the Hillsdale Farmers Market, where she's a regular in the winter, her flame-red hair and fiery passion for fresh ingredients warming up a parking lot of cold concrete. She knows everyone here, shaking hands, sniffing out the best stuff and shouting out enthusiasms.

"Ooh. Ooh. Nettles! Oh, smell these truffles. They're so-o-o sweet. I know, we'll do an Umbrian pasta with nettles. I'll pound the truffles with anchovy, then toss it with spaghetti. I love making things I've tasted before, food I just want to eat again and again."

The deal was sealed and another freshly reconceived old-country dish for her new restaurant, Nostrana, was ready for liftoff.

Nobody has done more to bring authentic Italian cooking to Portland than Whims. Genoa, celebrated for staging evening-long bacchanalia feasts, was her baby for 20 years. Between kitchen stints, she was on pilgrimage to Italy, nosing around farmhouses and street markets or sitting at the feet of her/mentor Marcella Hazen, the Julia Child of Italian cuisine, or perfecting wood-fired Neapolitan pizza in her backyard oven.

For her latest act, Whims has busted out of her usual haunt, the small, intellectual food outpost. Nostrana is a big, rustic-modern (if not particularly intimate) neighborhood place serving the high-chair crowd, savvy seniors, suburbanites and everybody between. The lines start forming nightly before the doors even open.

Why is Nostrana our Restaurant of the Year? Because it's rare to find food this accomplished and this affordable. Entrees average \$13 to \$16 in a time when top-end chefs can command twice that. Whims has moved to a larger scale without compromising the quality that has defined her career. And she's still articulating the style that makes her Portland's own Italian-food chef laureate: super-fresh, stripped-down simple, evoking an impressive range of rustic Italian cooking at a high level.

Nearly everything — pizzas, steaks, fruit crisps, even fresh crab — is suffused with the smoke of wood fire and a lovely sense of uncluttered perfection. Eating here is like stepping into one of those legendary unmarked trattorias in Italy.

We're also impressed that partner Marc Accuardi's sophisticated, mostly Italian wine list offers extremely good value. And that Nostrana is opening doors for the MP3 generation to discern the difference



Keeper of the flames: Cathy Whims' spare, intimate Italian food is fueled by the deep scent and beautiful char of wood fire, which perfumes Nostrana's pizzas, meats and fish.

between a run-of-the-mill minestrone and adventurous regional specialties such as Venetian squab stew or a signature soup from Trieste packed with pork, sauerkraut and Borlotto Lamon beans.

As you read Nostrana's menu — a collaboration between Whims and talented co-chef Deb Accuardi — a few things are clear. Ingredients are beautifully sourced, and little touches are special — homemade fruit mustard to accompany fine cured meats, or raisin-pocked onion relish

to pile on earthy rabbit crostini. About one-third of the menu changes every day, keeping palates and ideas fresh.

Authentic Neapolitan pizzas — whole and unsliced, with minimal toppings — are the stars. They arrive thin and chewy-crisp, a little sour and mottled with the essential bitter black spots that signal a dance with wood fire. Flavors can be jaw-dropping — perhaps smoky paprika salami mingled with the deep tang of Hungarian pickled peppers, or shiitake mush-

NOSTRANA

Simply delicious wood-fired Italian

1401 S.E. Morrison St., 503-234-2427; lunch Mon-Fri, dinner daily

Note: \$5 (pizzas \$8-\$14, most entrees \$13-\$16); full bar; reservations for six or more; Visa and Mastercard; parking lot.

On the Web: Behind the scenes at Nostrana at www.oregonlive.com/diner

rooms and salty pancetta set off by a whole duck egg sitting at dead center.

The best entrees involve meat and the flames that love them, especially exorbitantly luscious lamb riblets or bistecca Fiorentina, a thick porterhouse bursting from its glistening crust. Desserts, too, are terrific: a wedge of half-frozen cream roughed with crushed torrone candy; flaky crostata sharts plumped with peach cardamom jam; panna cotta, at once delicate and inventively tart.

But commitment may be the best ingredient in the house. Take away Cathy Whims' exuberance, her dedication to Italian cooking, and Portland would be a very different — and lesser — restaurant town. At Genoa she hired and influenced some of the city's most significant talents; today it's unthinkable to eat real-deal food by chefs John Taboada (Navarre), Kevin Gibson (Castagna) or Tommy Habetz (Gotham Bldg Tavern) without tasting how Whims led the way.

At Nostrana, Whims is identifying a new generation of talent while spreading the gospel of passion, rigor and authenticity. We hope the reach will extend to the flustered, disorganized front of the house and the sometimes less-than-knowledgable servers.

This latest journey began two years ago when two couples found magic in a little restaurant in Italy's Piedmont.

"It was lively and rustic," said Whims of the night she and husband David West dined with friends — and their current Nostrana partners — Marc and Deb Accuardi, who also own Gino's in Sellwood.

"Everyone met there on Sunday nights. It had blistered pizza, wood-charred steaks grilled so that the juice melted in a pot of beans. Simple. Straight. But delicious. We said, 'Wow. We wish we could eat at this place in Portland.'"

Happily, with Nostrana we all can.

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