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Drago Centro in downtown L.A.

The restaurant with the inspired Italian menu might be downtown L.A.'s best-kept secret. Find it and you'll go back again and again.



Gina Ferazzi / Los Angeles Times

Drago Centro, nestled among high rises in downtown L.A., exudes urban chic. It's Italian restaurateur Celestino Drago's latest and most ambitious restaurant yet, with a budget of \$7 million.

By S. IRENE VIRBILA

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Seriously, what is wrong with this town? If Celestino Drago, one of the best-known Italian restaurateurs in Southern California, can't get a crowd for his most ambitious restaurant yet, and a very glamorous one at that, then what? The fact that Drago Centro's location -- downtown L.A. -- may be outside the comfort zone of his fan base shouldn't be a deterrent for more intrepid Italophiles.

This is a seriously good restaurant that exudes urban chic. It's got views, a glamorous setting, a private dining room with a demonstration kitchen in a former bank vault and, most important, the best Italian cooking in the area, and some of the best anywhere in L.A. But where are the crowds?

They're there at lunch as harried business people tuck into risotto with beets and shrimp or a warm pheasant and chanterelle main course salad. But at night, even on a weekend, the dining room is often sparsely populated, despite an inspired menu from Drago and chef de cuisine Ian Gresik.

Part of the problem is that the restaurant is set well back from the street, without a clearly visible sign. Worse, there's no valet station out in front on Flower Street, and just a tiny sign and driveway for self-parking. The valet station is actually behind the restaurant, on Figueroa -- from Flower, you have to drive two blocks south to make a right turn, then come back up Figueroa, all the while on the lookout for a dimly lighted valet station. If you miss it, start all over again. It's absolutely crazy-making, and I'm sure many people have just driven off in frustration.

Too bad, because the food is eminently worth the effort, even if just for the pastas. Take your pick from fresh egg pasta, *grano duro* (the dried variety), and baked and stuffed pasta dishes. And they're not the same dishes seen all over town.

The chef's Sicilian roots are evident in spaghetti *alla chitarra* (cut on a wooden box strung with wires to make a square spaghetti instead of round) tossed in pesto *alla trapanese*, referring to the northwestern coast of Sicily, where cooks use tomatoes and almonds pounded in a mortar and pestle to make "pesto." The firm pasta and gritty pesto are wonderful together, an example of country restraint. More sumptuous in style are the wide *pappardelle* noodles sauced with a roasted pheasant ragù enriched with morel mushrooms -- like something you'd get during hunting season in Tuscany or Umbria.

Splendid dishes

For me, the texture and heft of dried durum wheat pasta trumps more delicate egg pasta almost every time. Here, the kitchen makes a splendid dish of *paccheri* (something like stubby rigatoni) with delicate, sweet spot prawns in a classic *puttanesca* sauce -- a little tomato with olives, garlic, capers and anchovies. It's a quiet beauty. *Garganelli*, made by tightly rolling up squares of pasta dough on the diagonal, loses something with an overly generous pork sausage and fennel seed sauce: The balance is all wrong. But I do like the buckwheat *pizzoccheri*, buckwheat pasta with fontina cheese, cabbage and potatoes straight from the mountains. At least I like it when the weather is cold.

Gresik turns out a fine oxtail ravioli too. But the most interesting stuffed pasta dish is something called *pane frattau sardo*, paper-thin Sardinian bread baked with layers of tomato sauce, *salame*, egg yolk and dots of pecorino cheese. It's served very hot in a rectangular cast iron skillet and looks something like lasagna -- and is just as rich, almost too much so.

The menu offers some fine antipasti as well: a bowl of steamed mussels with lemon, garlic and lots of cracked black pepper, venison carpaccio with walnuts in a svelte sherry vinaigrette or a silken foie gras crème caramel to spread on bread. House-made mozzarella, however, is not the revelation you'd expect: The milk maybe doesn't have enough flavor. The real star on the antipasti list is langoustine carpaccio, its briny sweetness set off by a few pomegranate seeds and a squeeze of lemon.

Salads bypass Caesar or *tricolore* in favor of one that's composed of grilled artichokes and Belgian endive garnished with whole pistachios in Drago's kiss-off to foam, a sabayon made with extra virgin olive oil. My favorite, though, may be the *panzanella* with cubes of heirloom beets tossed with crunchy croutons, basil leaves and thinly shaved truffled pecorino. A winter version of summer's tomato and cucumber *panzanella*, if you will.

Between bites, take a moment to savor Stanley Felderman's design. Drago has always had a taste for contemporary design, since Drago, his Santa Monica flagship, opened in 1991 and made every other Italian restaurant around look distinctly old-fashioned. His new restaurant makes even more of a statement. It should: The budget was \$7 million.

With its vaulted cove ceiling, black Murano glass chandeliers, and floor-to-ceiling windows looking across Flower to the Central Library, Drago Centro has a sense of the city like no other Italian restaurant in town. The main feature of the design, a free-standing glass wine tower that separates the bar from the dining room, sends the message that this is a restaurant serious about wine (in this case, it's true). Everything about Drago Centro spells top-notch *ristorante*.

The mains

Like most Italian restaurants, the antipasti and *primi* are more interesting than the main courses, which are well-prepared, but not very exciting. Drago's got roasted black cod. He's got a respectable *cacciucco* -- a seafood stew. An osso buco too, that's lamb instead of veal. And of course there's the requisite veal chop, this one served with an earthy lentil ragout adorned with sweetbreads.

The one real standout is the steak, which Drago also featured at his short-lived Italian steakhouse. The beef comes from a grass-fed Piedmontese breed raised in this country, which is leaner than typical American ones and has a haunting grassy flavor.

Michael Shearin, formerly head sommelier at Guy Savoy in Las Vegas, has put together a savvy list of Italian wines, including some from California, France and the rest of the world.

It's worth chatting with Shearin a little before ordering: He can turn you on to what's new and most exciting on his list. One night, we discovered a Veltliner from Alto Adige that drank like a dream; another time, it was a lovely Voglar from Peter Dipoli. The list runs 23 pages; Shearin's also pouring 50 wines by the glass or carafe.

In Italy, dessert would most likely be fruit or something simple such as pears poached in red wine. The sweets here are wisely on the light side. However, they're probably not compelling enough to give up if you have to make a choice between pasta or dessert. Still, the kitchen turns out some delightful Italian doughnuts with ricotta cream and a lovely coffee-flavored panna cotta strewn with candied hazelnuts.

Downtown dining is rich in wursts, tacos and French dip sandwiches. But when you want to dress up for a night on the town, which may or may not include a concert or a play, don't forget that downtown now has this shiny new Italian restaurant. It's not so far once you know the way (and where to park).

LOCATION

525 S. Flower St., City National Plaza, downtown Los Angeles; (213) 228-8998; www.dragocentro.com.

AMBIENCE

Sleek contemporary Italian restaurant across from the Central Library with a great urban vibe and smart cooking from Celestino Drago and chef de cuisine Ian Gresik.

SERVICE

Mostly attentive and informed.

PRICE

Dinner antipasti, \$9 to \$18; salads, \$12 to \$14; pasta and risotto, \$14 to \$26; main courses, \$26 to \$37; side dishes, \$9 to \$14; desserts, \$9. Lunch antipasti, \$9 to \$15; pasta and risotto, \$14 to \$18; main course salads, \$18 to \$23; fish and meat, \$24 to \$27.

BEST DISHES

Mussels with cracked black pepper, venison carpaccio, grilled artichoke salad with pistachios, basil spaghetti with tomato-almond pesto, *pappardelle* with pheasant and morels, *paccheri* with spot prawns and *puttanesca* sauce, Sardinian-style lasagna, grass-fed beef rib-eye for two with anchovy-garlic mayo, grilled veal chop with sweetbreads and lentils, Italian doughnuts with ricotta cream, panna cotta *al caffè*.

WINE LIST

Astute, mostly Italian list from sommelier Michael Shearin, with 50 wines by the glass and carafe as well. Corkage fee, \$25.

BEST TABLE

One of the banquettes at the back or sides of the room.

SPECIAL FEATURES

Two private dining rooms, one in a former bank vault that seats up to 40.

DETAILS

Open for lunch 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Monday through Friday; for dinner 5:30 to 10 p.m. Monday through Thursday, 5:30 to 10:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday. Full bar. Valet parking on Figueroa Street between 5th and 6th streets for dinner only, free for the first three hours, \$7 thereafter. At lunch, parking is underground on Level A of the building: the first two hours are \$5, with validation.



Photos by: Gina Ferazzi / Los Angeles Times