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## Can Sandro Go Home Again?



*A kitchen all his own for Sandro.*

*Photo: Steven Richter*

I contemplated a first visit to the new **Sandro's** somewhere up there in the wilds of the upper east side. I wasn't rushing. I had been depressed to see the giant Roman totally out of control in his last two or three kitchens as he lurched around town trying to find a home. I remembered too vividly the glory days of my own Italian innocence in 1985, when Sandro Fioriti first thrilled us with pungent sea urchin ravioli, lemon spaghetti and his exquisite fried calamaretti on 58th Street across from the legs of the Queensborough Bridge. The recent sloppiness of his signature pastas was embarrassing. It was like suddenly being forced to see Elvis grown blowsy, girdled in his studded white jump suit. A denial of memory.

It was Tony May who first brought Sandro to America, so when Tony, San Domenico proprietor and champion of all things Italian, emailed to suggest we join him for dinner there, I thought...yes, how perfect. As I have said again and again, a restaurant critic should have no friends. But then, there is life.

I know May from the 70's, days of his pioneering Italian Festivals at the Rainbow Room, where New Yorkers first tasted carpaccio and fine olive oil. I was there when the doors opened at San Domenico, an homage to Italy's San Domenico in Imola, and have eaten there in all its incarnations...most happily since Odette Fada took over the kitchen. And my guy and I had traveled with May's Rabelaisian Il Gruppo dei Ristoratori Italiani on a tasting binge in Calabria a

few years ago. We hadn't talked for a long while.

Tony is perched at the bar sipping a glass of white wine as we descend a few steps into the small narrow off-white-washed room. A soothing calm inhabits Sandro's slightly out-of-the-way low rent retreat, full as it is tonight with a Park Avenue Diaspora. The linens are standard issue, but so what? (I'm growing bored with today's bare tables.) A charming ceramic crock of my favorite everyday olive oil from the Barbera family in Sicily sits on each table.

"That's Sandro's wife, Anna, at the door," May says. "She is the most wonderful wife in the world. To put up with him all these years." We move to a table. "I shouldn't sit facing the door," he warns. "I'll have to jump up to greet all the people." True. Everyone looks familiar. Affluent New York on a junket to a new zip code.

"Tony," they cry. He pops up again and again, air-kissing cheeks, embracing his countrymen, exchanging multo Italiano affectione (I just made up that word. Sounds Italian.) So finally I get the story: Tony is the enabler here, the money behind Sandro's, and the tormented Roman's new life coach. Everybody who once loved Sandro is back tonight. And some are back for a second or third meal. Lillian Vernon tells me her dinner was fabulous.

I'd like to say I agree. I'd like to say it is just like old times. But it isn't. Not yet. Sandro's heart is as big as his stomach, which precedes him like an announcement these days, above wild colorful chef pajamas. And his ladle must be outsize, too.

Nicely firm bucatini amatriciani is drowning in sauce tonight and doesn't need such a generosity of meat. I'm not a fan of salt cod, but the texture of his carpaccio of cod is oddly pleasant, needing only a less fierce dose of hot pepper. I want more briny sea scent in the sea urchin ravioli. And if I'm going to be really fussy, I'd say don't slice the bread so far ahead.

Still, I'm happy enough with his crispy fried artichokes alla giudea even though they're not the Lilliputian flowers I remember. ("That's the size that's coming from California this week," May explains). Pan seared cuttlefish combines brilliantly with slivers of artichoke. I love the super crustiness pan-frying gives to his butterflied baby chicken alla diavolo. Braising baby octopus with black olives, capers and tomatoes makes for a rich and necessarily salty entree.

I discover that the prize-winning Planeta winery in Sicily has added a Syrah with a touch of the local nero d'avolo grape to its repertoire: a wonderful red to drink with what we're eating tonight.

Now Sandro has come to the table. He certainly looks happy. In Italian he confides to Tony that one of his chef's has already left. Tony shrugs.

"Sandro likes his kitchen a certain way," Tony explains. "He has to have it that way." I tell May about the time we were having dinner at one of Sandro's migratory nests and heard screams and pots smashing from the kitchen. I seem to remember someone emerging with a cleaver, but that could be a false memory. Maybe from a Tarantino movie.

The three of us order one portion of torta to share. Half an apple tart arrives on a large platter. "That is a portion for one person according to Sandro," May concedes with a grin. As for me, I

cannot help myself. I must have a bite of apple on pastry and a bite of pastry with custard and a bite of apple with custard and then, another bite, just to be sure.

We offer Tony a ride home.

“No. I think I’ll hang around awhile.”

“Does he listen to you?” I ask.

“Sandro doesn’t like to talk to anybody who knows less than he does. But when I talk, he perceives me as knowing as much as he does. So that’s good. I haven’t seen him so happy for some time. So settled down.”

May reports that Sandro’s is turning reservations away now. If necessary, I’ll just book a table again one day as Sophia Loren. And if I ever find myself ravenous late at night -- sleepwalking toward the fridge on Ambien maybe -- I’ll wander toward Sandro’s bar where spaghetti is on the house at midnight and at 1am they give a way cappuccino and homemade crossants oozing nutella.

306 East 81st Street 212 288 7374. Closed Sunday