

Chaotic Sandro Serves Pasta That'll Make You Weep: Alan Richman

Review by Alan Richman

June 6 (Bloomberg) Sandro is back. And not for the first time.

How many places has he been? Tracking Sandro Fioriti -- chef, icon, deity, eccentric -- requires the instincts of a Kremlinologist. "He fights with owners and he's gone," said one such person. "He's Mary Poppins."

In New York alone, his spokeswoman says, he's worked at 12 restaurants minimum. She adds, "I'm guessing more." He's so revered that almost half the places where he's cooked have been named for him. The first Sandro's, the second Sandro's, Serafina Sandro and Sandro's in St. Martin. (So that's where he went when he disappeared from New York.)

Now there's a new Sandro's, a 50-seat restaurant on the Upper East Side.

He has publicly declared his intention of staying put. Do we believe him? There are promises and there is history.

At his apogee, he cooked Italian food as well as anybody ever has in the U.S., combining simplicity, authenticity and boldness. When I ate at the first Sandro's in the late '80s with Victor and Marcella Hazan, they called him their favorite Italian chef in America. Recently, Victor told me the dinners they had there "were unconditionally the best Italian meals we ever had in any Italian restaurant outside of Italy."

The good news: You can get food that good at the new Sandro's.

The bad: Not often enough. But when you're lucky, you will not believe America can remind you so much of Rome.

Let's get past the small stuff.

The restaurant is cramped, bright, loud -- "like a Roman trattoria," one guest said, happily. The walls are white. "Rent-control-apartment white," another guest griped.

Friendly, Random

The staff is pleasant and not particularly efficient, but that might be because the man turning out the food isn't. The wine list is old Italy: weak on whites, decent on reds. The bread sticks are crunchy, peppery, exceptional; the sliced bread can be ignored. Desserts -- by Sandro -- seem to be the ones he was making at the first Sandro's. They weren't special then, and in this regard he has remained consistent.

Not much will catch your eye. Two choices. The first is an aged, bright-red Berkel meat-slicing machine. A beauty. The second is Sandro, striding through the dining room. Not such a beauty.

``He's a huge man, Munster-esque, always coming out of the kitchen wearing an apron stained with blood," said one of my guests, a fanatical Sandro follower. ``It's not like he's a butcher, but more like he's a murderer."

He is a sight. He's 6 feet 4, not thin, not kempt, not calm. Sometimes he wears a white T-shirt. Always I saw him in the same multihued chef's pants. My guest was obsessed with the pants. She decided they were Jamaican, then aboriginal. She saw snakes in them. After a while, I did too.

Chef Bottleneck

The Sandro of today has a few weaknesses I don't recall from the old days. Too much salt. Uneven seasoning. He has assistants, but basically he cooks everything. Time moves at his pace: irregularly.

On one visit, I ordered his famous fried artichokes immediately after sitting down, hoping to have them with a bottle of Italian sauvignon blanc.

The Roman Empire didn't last as long as that meal. An hour passed. I counted only six plates of food in front of 33 customers. To its credit, the staff was frantically slicing mortadella and passing it out, complimentary. The Berkel hummed. Finally, when we were on our red wine, out came one whole fried artichoke, cold and oily -- for \$15.

Bad Sandro.

Good Sandro crafts pastas that will make you understand why Italians weep with pleasure over their food. Spaghetti with lemon is an act of daring, the sauce balanced exquisitely between tart and sweet. His tomato sauce invites contemplation: How can anything this chunky be so subtle and refined?

Magnificent Pasta

A special at one meal was spaghetti with porcini and ``a scent of truffles." We asked the waiter what that might be. He replied, ``A secret. Sandro won't tell me." It was hauntingly good, with both a scent of truffles and a hint of greatness.

I was unable to try two signature dishes. Porchetta isn't on the menu. Sea-urchin ravioli are, but they were never available.

Balsamic vinegar elevates chicken livers to the poultry pantheon. In this case a \$12 appetizer portion was large enough to feed three -- portions at Sandro's tend to be extremely generous.

Of the main courses, branzino arrosto (sea bass) with potatoes should not be missed. ``Arrosto" means roasted. The menu translates it as ``broiled." Who knows? The dish, prepared with white wine and lemon, was as sweet and savory as fish can get. Grilled beef with olive oil, garlic and lemon was generous and juicy. Sandro does love lemon.

Meat Mystery

Veal missed every time. Two scaloppini dishes (one with lemon, the other a special with eggplant and mozzarella) were overcooked. Same for a veal chop that arrived unbidden instead of the lamb

chops we'd ordered medium-rare. Abbacchio alla Romana, a famous dish, is supposedly sweet baby lamb. What appeared were wine-soaked bits of meat clinging to tiny, mysterious bones. I was reminded of goat all the times I've been sorry I'd ordered goat.

The pan-seared cuttlefish with crispy artichokes weren't cuttlefish, although they were superb. The cuttlefish was calamari.

I asked the waiter to enlighten me.

``Sandro decided to do it his way," he said.

He pointed to his head. ``You know Sandro."

The Bloomberg Questions

Cost? Prices range from \$7.75 for salads to \$34.95 for the Abbacchio alla Romana.

Sound level? When you scream with joy over the spaghetini al limone, it's unlikely you'll be heard.

Date place? Yes, because all meals by Sandro come with memories.

Inside tip? If you enjoy unusual outdoor dining, reserve the single table outside the front door, on 81st Street, under a staircase.

Special feature? The cutesy blond bartender who used to be a cigarette girl at Regine's loves to dish. Sample: ``Everybody knows Sandro is a nightmare," she said, affectionately, ``but Regine (Zylberberg, of Regine's) was much worse."

Private room? No.

Lunch? No.

Will I be back? Of course. Geniuses deserve every excuse you make for them.

Sandro's is at 306 E. 81st St. Information: +1-212-288- 7374. Web site is under construction.