

It Spot - Toronto

Florentia

Who said Italy Wasn't Romantic?

Erin Hershberg, MartiniBoys.com | July 30, 2009

Torontonians tend to think of Toronto as the center of the world. Although to outsiders this kind of civic solipsism might seem a tad dubious, to Italy born painter-cum-Canadian-restaurateur, Marco Sassone, this notion is exactly what lead him to the ubiquitous Canadian city. While living a perfectly contented life in San Francisco selling his Van Gogh inspired paintings and owning a successful restaurant called Pazzia, Sassone felt it was time for a change. The stereotypical portrait of the flighty artist is a fair representation in Sassone's case because when his friend told him he had to move to Toronto: "Yonge and Bloor was the center of the world," he fled to it immediately.

Meanwhile, in Milan, Chef Bruno Soleri, who Sassone met in San Francisco while the chef was doing a stint at Alice Waters's ubiquitous, organic restaurant, Chez Panisse, was busy working at his restaurant Lovenfood. But like Sassone, Soleri is an artist (with food that is), so when he got a call from Sassone that he had to come to Toronto to open a restaurant, he was on a plane to the Canadian city two days later.

Two years later, Florentia, Mount Pleasant's new authentic Italian restaurant, was born. Of course, the 100% authentic restaurant took a while to develop, so in the mean time Sassone spent time selling his \$20,000 - \$40,000 paintings at galleries like Odon Wagner and Soleri worked at Canoe and with Cossimo Mammoliti at Terroni. Working with the inspiring Cossimo, whose cuisine is 99% southern Italian, Bruno decided that his restaurant needed to be as authentic as possible. Visiting Pizzeria Libretto, whose menu, chef Bruno maintains, is only "around 75% authentic," he felt after that he needed to give his customers a more true experience.

The eponymous Florentia, which takes its name from one of Sassone's paintings, that proudly spans the length of the restaurant's wall, has a menu that screams Italy. At the



Photo by Charla Jones

same time, unlike many authentic Italian restaurants, the menu does not focus on a specific region of the verdant country. Chef Bruno develops the menu according to what is fresh, what is in season, and what on a particular day is tickling his fancy. On the weekly rotating menu and revolving daily specials, expect to find classic dishes like house-made ravioli with roasted eggplant, basil, and water-buffalo mozzarella; red snapper in a traditional Tuscan sauce with shrimp, clams, and garlic; black angus striploin with smoked paprika, arugola, parmigiano; or thinly sliced veal with tuna and capers. If you are so inclined and have developed a relationship with the chef, you can let him surprise you, omakase style.

Soleri's cuisine has been celebrated in such renowned publications as Vogue and Vanity Fair. And though Florentia's location might not exactly be Graydon Carter-worthy, like a downtown spot might be, Soleri's food doesn't really need that little boost of cachet...and if it did, well, I just gave it. Salute. – E.H