

DINING REVIEW

La Pietra Cucina

1545 Peachtree Street, Suite 101, Atlanta. 404-888-8709

By MERIDITH FORD GOLDMAN

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All' amatriciana is one of Italy's most cherished sauces, and arguably one of its most famous.



Becky Stein/AJC special
Caramelized brussels sprouts and pancetta.



Becky Stein/AJC special
A warm pine nut tart served with unpasteurized milk gelato is a highlight of the dessert menu.



Becky Stein/AJC special
Bevette all' amatriciana.

All famous Italians — from Sophia Loren to spaghetti — are known for their special characteristics, usually drawn from their origins. Loren's are obvious, and even she admits that what you see she "owes to spaghetti."

But all' amatriciana's beginnings are more ambiguous. From the small town of Amatrice in the region of Lazio, in the center of the boot-shaped country, the sauce has been adopted by Rome, as well as the rest of Italy.

Muddled origins are dangerous in terms of interpretation — and all' amatriciana has its share of the latter. Romans have no problem, for instance, adding onions to this rich sugo, while those from Amatrice might consider this blasphemous, adding garlic instead. But everyone agrees on one ingredient: guanciale — cured pig jowl, similar to pancetta, coated in black pepper and a specialty of Lazio.

It's rare to see this sauce in Atlanta; even rarer to have it taste as good as it does at La Pietra Cucina (which basically means "stone kitchen"), a small Italian restaurant taking up part of the space once occupied by Midcity Cuisine.

The restaurant is literally and figuratively one of the best finds I've come across in some time — unexpected and totally satisfying. Chef Bruce Logue is originally from Atlanta, but spent time growing up out West and even more time staging (working in a kitchen, most often for free, to learn) in Italy and working at Mario Batali's Babbo in New York. He returned to Atlanta to work at Craft, but after waiting around too long for it to open, worked on a deal with Antica Posta owner Marco Betti, an arrangement that eventually fell through. Then, Logue modestly opened La Pietra Cucina.

We all should be very glad he did — other than Betti's Tuscan wonder in Buckhead and Riccardo Ullio's Sotto Sotto, Italian of this caliber doesn't exist in Atlanta. Logue has a deep understanding of Italian cuisine,

but his interpretation is his own, as with a Calabrese sausage dip he makes from the pork he uses to make his guanciale. Rich and fully seasoned with herbs and fennel, the appetizer is a perfect mate for house-made grissini — crisp, floury breadsticks full of cheesy flavor.

It's hard to find the restaurant, even if you know where Midcity Cuisine was; it occupies what was Midcity's private dining room. The glass windows leading to it, and through Midcity's now-empty dining room, are marked by only an 8-by-11-inch piece of paper with the restaurant's name taped to the door. And don't look for a Web site or online reservations; neither exist (part of me hopes they never will).

But let's get back to that all' amatriciana. Logue serves it with perfectly cooked bevette, a string pasta that lies somewhere between spaghetti and tagliatelle. It's made in Roman style, with rich notes of tomato, red onion and pecorino Romano wrapped around the flavor of the pork.

Logue knows that, especially in his early months, specials are the easiest way to express his cooking style while gauging public opinion: He offers lots of them, though many repeat from week to week.

One of the best is his whole roasted fish. This time of year brings fresh snapper from the Gulf, and Logue encrusts it in sea salt and herbs, as in branzino me alati, and the beautiful fish is brought to the table before it is filleted. Sliced steak is sumptuous over root vegetables — carrots, large bulbs of seductive fennel and earthy red beets. Logue also experiments successfully with an appetizer of poached sausage over lentils with an apricot mustardo and some of the best arancini (fried risotto balls) this side of the Atlantic.

There were only two servers on my visits; they split the 12 or so tables amicably and know Logue's cooking, if not Italian cuisine in general, very well — they are able to offer wine suggestions and steer you toward desserts. Of the latter, my favorite is the ugly duckling of them all, a pine nut tart with a buttery, flaky crust served with milk gelato made from unpasteurized cow's milk. Amid splashier offerings of zeppole (which, admittedly, were awe-inspiring spheres of sugary sin), it stood out for the sheer flavor and simplicity it offered.

La Pietra Cucina may be small and as yet discovered only by Atlanta's foodie cognoscenti, but Bruce Logue's gift of Italian cooking — true to form — is big, bold and beautiful.

Benvenuto.

LA PIETRA CUCINA

Overall rating: ★★★★★

Food: Italian

Service: Well-versed in Italian dishes, especially Logue's and completely hospitable

Price range: \$\$-\$\$\$

Credit cards: Visa, Mastercard, American Express

Hours of operation: Lunch, 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Mondays-Fridays. Dinner, 5-10 p.m. Mondays-Fridays and 5:30-10:30 p.m. Saturdays

Best dishes: Bevette all' amatriciana, sausage dip, whole roasted fish, pine nut tart

Vegetarian selections: Lots of pastas and salads sans meat

Children: Sì! Sì!

Parking: \$3 valet or on-street

Reservations: Yes

Wheelchair access: Yes

Smoking: No

Noise level: Low

Patio: Yes

Takeout: Yes

Address, telephone: 1545 Peachtree St., Suite 100, Atlanta. 404-888-8709

Web site: None yet

KEY TO RATINGS

★★★★★ **Outstanding:** Sets the standard for fine dining in the region.

★★★★☆ **Excellent:** One of the best in the Atlanta area.

★★★☆☆ **Very good:** Merits a drive if you're looking for this kind of dining.

★★☆☆☆ **Good:** A worthy addition to its neighborhood, but food may be hit or miss.

★☆☆☆☆ **Fair:** The food is more miss than hit.

Restaurants that do not meet these criteria may be rated **Poor**.

PRICING CODE: \$\$\$\$\$ means more than \$75; \$\$\$\$ means \$75 and less; \$\$\$ means \$50 and less; \$\$ means \$25 and less; \$ means \$15 and less. (The price code represents a meal for one that includes appetizer, entree and dessert without including tax, tip and cocktails.)