

**LA PIETRA CUCINA**

RATING: ★★★★★

1545 Peachtree St.,
404.888.8709

What the stars mean: 1 = fair, some noteworthy qualities; 2 = good, above average; 3 = very good, well above norm; 4 = excellent, among the area's best; 5 = world-class, extraordinary in every detail. Reviews are based on multiple visits. Ratings reflect the reviewer's overall reaction to food, ambiance and service.

RESERVATIONS *Excellent idea, especially on weekends. The jury is still out on whether the restaurant will be open on Sundays.*

PARKING *Valet service is available and much easier to figure out than the parking garage.*

NEW TO YOU *Though it's been unofficially open since August, La Pietra Cucina plans to close May 3 and reopen around May 18 with full renovations in place, including seating for 200 in a main dining room, private dining area and tables on the terrace. Other changes include an expanded menu and wine list.*

Ciao Time

Introducing La Pietra Cucina and Il Mulino, two new Italian stallions in Atlanta's resto race

| By Danny Bonvissuto | Photography by Lauren Rubinstein |

I've never been so relieved to pick up the scent of sautéed garlic in my life. After getting lost on Peachtree Road (imagine that), turned around in a parking garage, wandering through two office buildings and finally throwing myself upon the mercy of a security guard who put me in an elevator, sent me down one floor and told me to turn to my right and follow the curve ... I am standing at the front door of La Pietra Cucina. I guess. There's no sign.

Turns out my friend, Linda, and I are the only ones who are excited about our arrival. There's no host or host stand, just a vast, empty space with a kitchen on the far wall to my right. I see a handful of people in a separate room ahead and make my way toward them to ask how in the h-e-double hockey sticks you go about getting seated, when a server appears at the last second, looking vaguely surprised someone else has figured out how to find the restaurant. He seats us at a table, one of about eight in the room, all of which are haphazardly and solely covered in black-over-white tablecloths. No bud vase containing

a single red Gerber daisy. No tea candle. No flatware or artfully folded napkins. On a little ledge beside the table are six silver penguin figurines—the kind of festive holiday décor you might find on the buffet table of an office party—and that is the sum total of the décor.

The only part of La Pietra Cucina that doesn't seem to be suffering from resto schizophrenia is the menu. Though it's printed on card stock confetti paper—the kind naïve college grads might use for their resumes when they mistakenly think it'll show off their personality—it's quite confident with promises of tuna crudo with chilled cucumber brodo, cast-iron roasted Springer Mountain chicken with fregola, and dry-rubbed Painted Hills hanger steak with griddled polenta. In a few places, chef Bruce Logue, who's originally from Atlanta but has worked throughout Italy and New York, including Mario Batali's Babbo, shows possession and pride, using terms like “my Calabrese sausage dip” and “my guanciale” to spotlight a few of the many things he makes in-house.



MORE THAN DECOR *Clockwise from top left: Calamari in Sicilian tomato zupetta; linguini and clams; and zeppole at La Pietra Cucina, Atlanta's new anti-restaurant under the direction of chef Bruce Logue*

When the calamari arrives, the awkward atmosphere, scattered (though educated) service and bad background music become little more than charming eccentricities—and an overall lesson in never judging a book by its drab and slightly distracted cover. Though Linda doesn't trust any squid that's not fried and accompanied by a small cup of aioli, even she is entranced by the Sicilian soup-style presentation with one-bite cuts of calamari floating in a shallow and oily red sauce along with couscous, thick rounds of caperberries, kalamata olives and pine nuts, each flavor singing its own song, yet in perfect harmony with the others. Later on, Logue will tell me that in Sicily they add ocean water to their recipe, but he improvises with caper juice.

There's a raw, honest look and feel to each of Logue's dishes, and an unmistakably talented hand with a respect for each ingredient. Of the antipasti, the prosciutto di Parma is the best example of this, comprised of house-made ricotta paired with Emilian flatbread, shiny with olive oil and prosciutto cured in-house and cut to order. The seasonal risotto, mushroom on my visit, is slightly soupy but not to be mistaken for thin, so rich and perfumed with mushroom, then finished with dark slashes of aged balsamic for contrast in both taste and color. The hand-cut pappardelle, long, lazy noodles folded over a hearty Bolognese ragu and



CHAIN REACTION *Left:* Large tapestries and long-stemmed roses in Il Mulino's main dining area. *Below:* The very sharable tomato and buffalo mozzarella salad.



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finished with a heavy hand of grana padano, honors an Old World original, while the linguini and clams is a vibrant collaboration of littlenecks dotted with red and green pequinillo peppers, pancetta and herbed breadcrumbs in a broth I fear I will never know again, no matter how many times I order this dish in other restaurants. Every bit as adept with sugar as he is with flour, Logue's zeppole, which many call Italian-style donuts though they're not flat and don't have holes, are so delightful that Linda and I have little use for the accompanying espresso-chocolate dipping sauce.

In a city where restaurants open their doors with fanfare created by an army of architects, interior designers and PR agents who've been ratcheting up the hype for months, to say that La Pietra Cucina is a wallflower is the understatement of the century. In unofficial soft-opening mode since August, they've been hoping to fly under the radar while they work out the kinks in the kitchen (what kinks?) and create a more cohesive atmosphere. So much for that. The restaurant will close May 3 and reopen May 18 with a full makeover. Makes me sad to think the penguins might not preside over my next visit.

Downtown is also flying the red, white and green flag in the 191 Peachtree Tower where Il Mulino opened recently. This is an offshoot of the original New York location, a tiny West Village spot with lace-covered windows and gruff-yet-lovable male Italian servers in tuxes, which, at over 20 years old, is still a hard reservation to score even a month in advance.

That marinara-splattered, lived-in-loved-in feel is a tough one to replicate, especially at the bottom of an office building with a service staff that very definitely does not have last names that end in vowels. But all the elements are in place, including the full frontal assault of free food that starts before you bend your knees to sit down. Paper-thin slices of zucchini, pan fried and drowning in olive oil, greet me at the table, followed quickly by bread, bread and more bread and a server lugging a full wheel of aged Parmesan from which he carved out a few bites for snacking.

The menu is possibly the least edited list of food on the planet, so before you even crack the menu, decide between chicken, fish, beef or regular pasta to pare down the distractions. On top of that, there are approximately 25 specials, which are way too many but blessedly written down (they're rattled off verbally in New York). I settle on the clams (shriveled and covered in barely cooked bacon), tomato and buffalo mozzarella salad (a success, thanks to hothouse tomatoes from Maine) and the pasta sampler, which is cheesy in both senses of the word. Meant to mimic the Italian flag, it's red (rigatoni Bolognese), white (truffle ravioli in a Champagne cream sauce) and green (pesto gnocchi), the best of which being the ravioli. Desserts are dated and unremarkable, so hold out for the complimentary grappa, a traditional Italian grape-based after-dinner drink, which rotates flavors including white raisin and blueberry. **A**

IL MULINO

RATING: ★

191 Peachtree St.,
404.524.5777

RISKY BUSINESS *Parking downtown is definitely challenging, but Il Mulino provides a valet. The problem is that the valet is positioned directly in front of the restaurant on a very busy four-lane stretch of Peachtree Street, making for a mad, door-busting dash in and out.*

BUTTONED UP *Attire is dressy casual, especially during the daytime, as business lunchers make up most of the clientele.*

THE UPSSELL *As the servers are quick to point out, the wines by the glass are basic at best. Better to buy a half bottle if you plan on a few glasses.*