



NapaLife extra

*For those who live in Napa Valley –
and those who wish they did...*

An Insider's Look at Napa Valley

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Michael Chiarello's Bottega to open Friday

One of my most anticipated restaurants in Napa Valley opens this week in Yountville, further elevating the “per capita culinary capital of America to even greater heights.

Michael Chiarello, one of Napa Valley's best-known and most popular chefs, returns to the kitchen this week with the opening of Bottega in Yountville this Friday.

The restaurant has been holding family and friends trials this week, and though restaurants generally don't invite reporters for fear of them reporting problems, I was fortunate to eat at Bottega its first night.

They certainly needn't have worried about any disasters. The food and service were superlative, and the ambience superb even though they were sweeping out contractors yesterday afternoon to set the tables. I only had one disappointment, which I'll save for the end.

Chiarello is the chef who made Tra Vigne one of the ultimate Napa Valley restaurants, then left the restaurant business and went on to appear on such TV series as Food Network's Easy Entertaining, write cookbooks and other books, found the NapaStyle brand and retail stores and create Chiarello Family Vineyards.

He now steps back into the kitchen in Bottega, and his deft touch -- and taste -- is apparent. Bottega serves bold rustic-based but sophisticated farm-to-table cuisine reflecting the bounty of fresh produce in Napa Valley inspired by the diverse flavors of Italy.

Many of the dishes reflect Michael's Calabrese background, the hot new area for Italian food with its spicy flavors and great wines. Others come from other parts of Italy, all claiming wonderful food.

The food is a bit more refined than the food he prepared at Tra Vigne ten years ago, but well grounded in good taste rather than innovation for its sake. The culinary team is lead by Chef de Cuisine Nick Ritchie, who has worked with Chiarello for over 15 years.

We enjoyed an arrays of dishes, starting with three “stuzzichini,” sort of pre-appetizers, of veal crudo canola (think Italian egg rolls), pumpkin frittata (not

sweet at all) and marvelous fried “pasta” (I'd say pizza) with Chiarello's home-made prosciutto and a whimsical small cup of excellent Lambrusco. The latter represents a bit of an accomplishment, for general manager Joël Hoachuck admits he had to sip a lot of bottles to find this one. These plates are \$7 to \$11, and all the prices are in line with a moderate local restaurant, a bargain considering the food and experience.

We then had two antipasti, very angry (from jalapeños) hopper shrimp with golden deep-fried garlic slices that proved that you can buck tradition if you know what you're doing, plus a huge serving of home-made mozzarella on bruschetta with coarse artichoke purée. Those are \$13 and \$11.

We didn't have a primo (pasta) course, but eh tables on either side of us did, and they looked wonderful (as the diners admitted). They are \$14 for pumpkin risotto to \$19 for garganelli with rabbit ragù.

For the main (second) course, we had a perfectly prepared roast pork (\$21) and the absolute star of the evening, an incredible garlic-roasted Dungeness crab. It arrived in a large bowl with a whole carapace on top. It was removed by the server to uncover four very large crab quarters with saffron-crab aioli. It was so big, I quickly gave the two smaller quarters (without big claws) to our neighbors, leaving one for me and one for my friend. It was a big mistake. I should have eaten it all. And when I got to the bottom of the bowl, the garlic oil cried for dipping. The crab is \$28, the pork \$23.

Michael also offers his signature short ribs and whole roasted fish and far more.

Fortunately, we didn't have a side dish (contorno) as it would have been over the top.

We didn't have room for desserts, but couldn't help ourselves. The desserts were a semifreddo with honey, which was excellent, and the best chocolate cake I've ever had, crunchy on the outside, dense and soft inside.

Other dishes Chiarello prepares include warm pecorino pudding with wood-oven roasted spicy rapini and grilled bread; and seared foie gras and harvest foccacia panino with Zinfandel grape mosto.

House-made pastas include veal tortellini in brodo di carne with browned butter, butternut squash and sage; and Zinfandel spaghetti. Entrees feature seared day-boat scallops with pink chickpea passatina and cauliflower agrodolce; grilled swordfish alla barcaiola with ancient grain polenta and celery herb insalata.

We shared a bottle of Chiarello's 2006 Eileen Cabernet Sauvignon, named after his wife and business partner. It's an amazingly drinkable wine, rich and not tannic. It went well with the whole meal, from the spicy shrimp to the chocolate cake.

More than half of Bottega's wine list features local, small-production vintages from California complemented with a solid collection of Italian wines. Chiarello says his wine list is reasonably priced encouraging patrons to explore the many bounties of the region, with offerings by the quartino (8 oz.) as well as sparkling Prosecco by the glass. I'm still working on the "reasonably," as I haven't seen the wine list yet, however.

Bottega is located in one of Napa's most historic buildings. It was one of the oldest wineries in Napa Valley. In designing the restaurant, Chiarello and his wife, Eileen Gordon enlisted local architect Michael Guthrie to restore the integrity of the space by uncovering beautiful hard wood floors and timber beams, exposing old brick walls and large arched brick doorways and windows dating back to the 1800's. Local stonework used to construct the restaurant's two fireplaces helps emphasize the timeless feel.

The restaurant's interior, designed by architect Michael Guthrie and graphic designer Michael Mabry, takes inspiration from Chiarello's food, balancing the rustic and the refined with a variety of warm textures and finishes surrounding the 140 year old brick and timber beams of the historic building.

General Manager Joel Hoachuck oversees Bottega's dining rooms, which are comprised of three intimate seating areas with one of the few open kitchens in the Valley, and an exposed wood-burning oven, a classic copper bar and an outdoor lounge. The two indoor dining rooms seat 118 collectively, including a private dining/wine room and bar, and the outside covered Terrazzo with two wood-burning fireplaces seats 66 with both lounge and table seating. The lounge and full bar create comfortable gathering places for a glass of wine and paninoteca fare, allowing diners a spacious option for pre- and post-meal enjoyment.

Bottega opens on Dec. 5. It is in the V Marketplace, 6525 Washington St., Yountville, and serves dinner seven days a week from 5:30 until 9:30 pm Sunday through Thursday, and from 5:30 pm until 10 pm Fridays and Saturdays. Lunch service begins Dec. 12.

I'm sure the bar will become the new place to hang out in Napa Valley and the restaurant one of the Valley's favorites. My only disappointment: no pizza. They've got the oven and Michael is a master of pizza. Maybe that will come with the lunch menu or bar eating. Otherwise, at least that option is left for the two other upscale Italian restaurants coming to the left side of the street in Yountville.

For reservations, call 945-1050 For more information, visit www.botteganapavalley.com (soon).

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