

Life / Food & Wine

## Review: Campo restaurant finds fertile ground in Baby Point

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AARON HARRIS / TORONTO STAR

Campo restaurant is the kind of place that neighbourhoods welcome.

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By: **Amy Pataki** Restaurant Critic, Published on Mon Aug 24 2015

### Campo

**Address:** 244 Jane St. (near Ardagh St.) 647-346-2267, [camporestaurant.com](http://camporestaurant.com)

**Chefs:** Joe Fiocco and Carlos Ventura

**Hours:** Lunch, Wednesday to Friday, 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Dinner, Wednesday to Saturday from 6 p.m. Brunch Sunday, 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.

**Reservations:** yes

**Wheelchair access:** No

**Price:** Dinner for two with wine, tax and tip \$100

Restaurant critics have a trick we call The Gnocchi Test.

When first dining at an Italian restaurant, I order gnocchi to help determine the kitchen's overall skill. Heavy, gummy or crumbly potato dumplings speak volumes.

Carlos Ventura passes the test at Campo with flying colours.

His gnocchi (\$19) are small and fluffy, little potato clouds in a simple tomato sauce touched with basil,

daubs of stracciatella cheese and a glug of good olive oil.

The sole fault in this otherwise faultless dish is the mildness of Ventura's 'nduja. This Calabrian pork paste is, at its best, face-meltingly spicy. Here, the heat in an artisanal product from Chicago is disappointingly subtle.

Campo is the type of little restaurant that can, and does, make neighbourhoods happy.

The neighbourhood in this case is Baby (bah-bee) Point in the west end, where Ventura and fellow chef Joe Fiocco are chief cooks and bottle washers. Literally; there's no room for anyone else in the kitchen.

They also wait tables in the leisurely host/chef tradition of the European trattorias and enotecas that inspire them.

"We are small and this is our first project. We want to be hands-on and greet our customers and get to know them," the friends say in a joint phone interview.

This is in addition to turning out simple, seasonal and abundant dishes based on their Spanish and Italian backgrounds.

Ventura, 32, and Fiocco, 38, used to cook together at the nearby Old Mill Inn before moving on to C5 and Mistura, respectively. With Campo ("field"), they turned the former Camp space into a mellow daytime spot with Golden Oldies that gets vivacious at night when locals fill the captain's chairs and share plates of charcuterie (\$15).

A server, supplementing the owners on the floor one night, takes drink orders. Sangria (\$10) with a straw is the popular choice. Ground cinnamon adds a Christmas element to an otherwise summery drink of red wine and brandy cut with the bitterness of Crodino.

I like the realness of it all. Towering salads are well dressed and popping with flavour. Rio Mare oil-packed tuna (\$11) never tasted as good as when mixed into frisée, radicchio, shaved fennel and quartered cherry tomatoes. Underneath the greens, like buried treasure, lies a trencher of garlicky toast. Its heft — it needs to be cut with a steak knife — adds crunch to the lacy greens above.

Certainly Campo is a good place for a light summer meal. At many of the wooden tables, the Caesar-like salad (\$10) seems to fit that bill: Baby gem lettuce in a yolkless vinaigrette strong on mustard and anchovy under a flurry of grated Parmesan. Shards of country bread act as croutons.

But full dinners are satisfying, too. Polenta (\$22) is so creamy, it drips through the tines of a fork; you need a spoon to get it to your mouth. It pools underneath large meatballs made interesting thanks to raw chorizo sausage. It's a dish so straightforward and lusty, it's no surprise to find Mario Batali cookbooks and pig memorabilia on the bar.

Juicy pork sausage chunks with sly heat loll around hand-rolled garganelli while fresh green peas play hide-and-seek inside the pasta tubes (\$18). On top is another flurry of Parmesan.

Such a small operation holds no room for a pastry chef. Ventura and Fiocco make the two desserts (\$6) — three if you count assembling a \$9 cheese plate.

The first is a caramel pudding finished with Maldon flakes that nails the balance between sweet and

salty so brilliantly, you might find yourself scraping every last trace from the mason jar it comes in. (Don't judge.)

The second is as near a perfect example of tiramisu as I've found. The ladyfingers, despite being soaked in espresso, retain their integrity. Fat lines of sweetened mascarpone sandwich the cookies. Cocoa powder is dusted on like Herculaneum on a bad day.

Neither Ventura nor Fiocco can explain what makes the dessert so good, other than the fact they make it to order.

Maybe it's time to launch The Tiramisu Test.

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