

## Nice house — nobody home



By Michael Philippi  
Ungaretti & Harris • Restaurant Critic

**W**alking into Prosecco you sort of transport to a high-end Milan restaurant, with its impressive high ceilings, heavy drapes, textured walls and striking long bar. Heck, it even has a Rubenesque portrait to complete the experience. The room is breathtaking, if not a little cold, but the welcome by the maitre d' was warm.

The bread was warm and crusty, served with an interesting tapenade, consisting of eggplant, zucchini and celery in tomato sauce with the occasional pine nut. Even the first sampling of the Affettati Misti — mortadella, sopressa and prosciutto along with aged Asiago and Parmesan — went well enough and we were intrigued. The menu is well-written, full of promise, hope and interest. The wine was good, after all; it came from the "third-best wine list in the city," according to our waiter. But when they brought the food, prepared on site, instead of meats and wine cured and bottled elsewhere, we wanted to call a mistrial.

Spaghetti alla Diavola came with shrimp and had an olive and caper thing going on but the promise on the menu of a spicy marinara sauce was just a big, fat menzogna. It's one thing to offer a bland marinara, but not one that is billed as spicy. This had zero spice to it. Making matters worse, although the lunch crowd was nearly outnumbered by the wait staff, after asking twice nobody was apparently willing to bring us promised red pepper flakes. Similarly, although we asked and were promised linguine instead of spaghetti, either we got the best round linguine ever made or they forgot that too. Not the biggest thing in the world, but don't promise and then just blow it off. Like RICO predicate acts, once is a mistake, two or more is a pattern.

The Melanzane Griglia e Forno, or grilled eggplant with fresh and smoked mozzarella

and tomato sauce, did not fare much better. Here the flat tomato sauce could be forgiven and, granted, properly cooking eggplant is tricky, but this wasn't even close. The dish was served lukewarm at best, the eggplant — thick skin and all (also forgivable but not ideal) — was undercooked and underwhelming.

The best order was Orecchiette Tartufate, which is ear-shaped pasta with wild mushrooms, asparagus, sun-dried tomatoes all in a black truffle cream with shaved grana padano — a good but hardly unusual hard grating cheese — tossed in white truffle oil. If you really love truffle flavor and end up at Prosecco you should order this, but you better really like truffles because truffles are so strong what beets are to red and this dish is truffle-owned. Truffles are great grated over al dente pasta tossed in olive oil, but the truffle paste, plus the truffle oil, plus the rich, heavy cheese on top were too much by a lot. Make sure you get extra water.

If you like the "strong flavor take the dish over" theme then try the Spaghetti al Frutti di Mare, which is usually a safe bet. Here the menu promises "seasonal fresh seafood," which I recognize as risky, but in a place that looks like this it shouldn't be. Apparently in Chicago in March a couple clams, mussels, shrimp and lots and lots of salmon are "seasonal." I don't even think it was coho. Thank God it wasn't smelt season. While I have no issues with fish in pasta, salmon is not a good choice, and, pleading alternatively, if you do choose salmon go easy on it and don't cook it to death. This plate was chock full of overcooked chunks of salmon. If it were called "spaghetti with lots of overcooked salmon" it would have not been an actionable misrepresentation.

The last choice was the risotto on the daily special list. This was seriously bad. The white

rice was not really risotto and if the lump crab meat didn't come from a can, somebody got a raw deal. Maybe this is a better dinner place.

**Traveler's Tip:** Lawyers who travel to Los Angeles for winter depositions have the right instincts, but always make two mistakes. The first is eating in some fancy Beverly Hills designer place; celebrity chef preferred, if not actually celeb sighting. The better choice is to drive 15 minutes north and west to Malibu and eat at Gladstone's, on the ocean, sunset, surf crashing, seagulls, surfers, the whole thing. While you can't call any place with lobster on the menu a dive, you will be more comfortable in jeans or shorts than a suit. Share a giant broiled sampler of shrimp, scallops and fish, or try the Cajun fish tacos along with a frosty mug of micro brew. Steamed clams are not to be missed.

**Lagniappe:** The second L.A. mistake is staying in an overpriced Century City hotel so you can be close to the deposition. Close, especially for Chicago lawyers whose commute home is an hour or so, is both relative and vastly overrated. For less money (always vigilant of the client's coin purse) and a much better experience stay at the Loews Hotel in Santa Monica. It's on the beach, in walking distance to great food and drink and a pretty good star-watching venue, both the movie ones and the real ones in the clear, dark ocean sky. ■

### Pleadings:

Prosecco  
710 N. Wells St., Chicago  
(312) 951-9500

### Court costs for lunch:

Appetizers: \$10-\$14  
Entrees: \$14-\$22

### Verdict:

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