



# Amore at First Bite

Lake Avenue meets Italy at the *bellissima* new Trattoria Neapolis

STORY BY // SOPHIA KERCHER

▼ IT'S A BALMY SATURDAY NIGHT APPROACHING 8:30, AND THOUGH SOUTH LAKE AVENUE'S SIDEWALKS LOOK A BIT SLEEPY, INSIDE THE NEW TRATTORIA NEAPOLIS THE EVENING HAS JUST HIT ITS STRIDE. THE ENTRANCE OPENS TO A BUSTLING INDOOR TILED COURTYARD, WHERE COUPLES AT BANQUETTES ARE EATING OFF EACH OTHER'S PLATES AND FRIENDS ARE SWAPPING JOKES.

Inside the double-height main dining room, 30- and 40-somethings mingle at the bar, and families treat themselves to dessert at nearby booths. Tonight both the staff and the patrons appear particularly good-looking; everyone seems alluring in the restaurant's soft lighting.

Owner Perry Vidalakis, a longtime Pasadena resident, opened Trattoria Neapolis' elegant doors in mid-July, and his sterling culinary team, manned by chef Bryant Wigger (formerly of the Four Seasons Los Angeles) focuses on Italian fare with a California edge. The chef makes

his salumi, pastas, breads and the like in-house, and the restaurant's centerpiece is a gorgeous 7,000 pound wood burning oven for Neapolitan-style pizzas, which is complimented by the high ceilings and marble detailing throughout the space.

Along with the stunning interior and décor—Vidalakis admits he gave the designer a 62 page book of photographs he snapped around Europe for the restaurant's inspiration—the new San Gabriel Valley restaurant distinguishes itself with its four-tiered beverage program, which features an almost obsessive detail to artisanal wine, cocktails, beer and coffee.

You can't get to your table without pausing to admire the bar, which resembles a temple with its dark wood frame holding liquor, beer taps and wine stacked to the ceiling. Tonight the bar vibrates with a wrestle of jiggers and martini shakers. The cocktail menu is the baby of bar director Vincenzo Marianella who, alongside head bartender Ken Baranda, has

created drinks that utilize Italian spirits and liqueurs and celebrate the bar's close relationship with the kitchen. Ingredients like fresh figs, basil, red bell pepper and sage are just some of the reasons Pasadenans are whispering that the Raymond's 1886 has new competition in town. The beer is equally elevated; Christina Perozzi (beer sommelier and co-author of *The Naked Pint*) has brought forth local craft brews along with esoteric Italian suds, which have already gained kudos from the beer blogging community. Meanwhile, the Italian-raised Diego Meraviglia, a 4th level sommelier, hopes Trattoria Neapolis will be a pioneer for expanding Pasadena's wine palate with his artful selections that vary from obscure orange wines to mellow reds. Finally, Vidalakis trotted around the region tasting dozens of coffees until he settled on Portland's quality-driven Stumptown.

Vidalakis' first inspiration, however, was the Naples-style pizza. The entrepreneur spent months under the tutelage of a third generation pizzaiolo from Naples. He explains that the distinction for Neapolitan-style pizza is that the dough is cooked at a high-temperature which creates "leoparding," or charred spots, on the dough, which makes for a distinct taste. To create Trattoria Neapolis' signature pizza takes extra care because the oven is so hot the pizza can be cooked in 60 to 90 seconds, and it has to constantly be attended to so all sides are cooked evenly. Fitting Vidalakis' passion, the kitchen is equipped with an impressive double-armed dough mixer from Venice, and there's even a temperature-controlled room for rolling out the pizza dough.

Your friends will love the pizza at Trattoria Neapolis, with toppings ranging from house-made lamb sausage to inventive mascarpone. A few might find the crust too pillowy, but the menu as a whole is not polarizing. If it's in season, ask for a *stuzzichini* of sublimely ripe grilled peaches wrapped in prosciutto and dappled with pistachios. Don't miss the *panzanella* salad, which—although it's made with chunks of ciabatta, a hearty sprinkling of avocado and smoked tomato vinaigrette—is somehow light as air.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY FRANK NOAK





**LA DOLCE VITA.** (Previous page) The sun-filled garden room, and the entire restaurant, was designed by Hatch Design Group. Pork belly with eggplant caponata and blackberry mostarda.

**CHE BELLAI** (Left) A bartender shakes up a new concoction; Trattoria Neapolis' San Daniele pizza with prosciutto, smoked mozzarella, roast tomatoes and arugula. **MAGNIFICO.** (Right) The balcony, main dining room and the bar have finishes of marble, imported tile, wrought iron and custom woodwork.

Regulars are already returning for the *arancini*, crisp lobster risotto balls paired with zesty lemon aioli. Chef Wigger also prides himself on his *polipo*, which features perfectly seared octopus atop a smoky potato torta, and he defines his culinary skills by his delicate *gnocchi* with smoked pork shoulder and seared artichoke. Another excellent pasta dish is the risotto, which has a tomato base, shrimp and a crowning of cloud-like burrata.

Among the main courses, the *vitello*, or veal scaloppini with lemon butter, and the pan-roasted market fresh fish, which changes according to seasonal availability, have both left individuals sighing with pleasure. The dessert, of course, is meticulously planned according to season with a non-traditional *tiramisu* featuring peaches, pecans and caramel and other sweet delights. You may leave more satisfied, however, if you end the



night with a cocktail such as the aromatic The Doctor which has two different kinds of Amaro and rye, or try the *affogato*, Trattoria Neapolis' alcoholic twist on the gelato and espresso Italian classic.

As the evening hums along with a mash-up of Italian music and light-hearted chatter, and another round of wine is recommended by the attentive staff, don't be surprised if you find yourself eavesdropping as a woman grabs Vidalakis by the arm, draws him in and

thanks him for bringing such a place to Pasadena. And she's not alone in her enthusiasm; at 10:30 the space is still humming.

Vidalakis smiles, revealing that he held out for three years for this South Lake location. "I feel like the restaurant scene has sort of been lagging behind in Pasadena," he says, "and I hope we can change that." *Salute!* ☺

336 S. Lake Ave., Pasadena. 626.792.3000 or [trattorianeapolis.com](http://trattorianeapolis.com)

