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CHEFS AT HOME

A Touch of Italy: Polenta and Panna Cotta

Dallas Chef David Bull Gives Traditional Italian Cuisine a Modern Twist

By JOYCE GEMPERLEIN August 7, 2008

(See Corrections & Amplifications item below.)

THE CHEF: David Bull is the James Beard-nominated executive chef of Bolla, an Italian restaurant nestled in the newly renovated Stoneleigh Hotel & Spa in Dallas, Tex. Mr. Bull, a 1994 graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, previously worked at the Mansion at Turtle Creek in Dallas and the Driskill Hotel Grill in Austin. He was named one of America's best new chefs by Food & Wine Magazine in 2003.



Dylan Cross for the Wall Street Journal Chef David Bull

KNOWN FOR: Regional Italian cooking that, at Bolla, goes modern: for example, gnocchi served with butter-poached octopus and olive oil infused with black olive puree.

THE MEAL: Both of these recipes are ideal for entertaining because, for the most part, they can and should be made a day ahead. Just before serving, toss the salad with its dressing and mound it on the polenta. The flavor and consistency of the fig sauce for the panna cotta can be enhanced by using fresh figs during the summer months, and by being served at room temperature.

KITCHEN TIP: Never walk away from polenta that's over a flame. Use a thick saucepot and stir the mixture continuously, or it will scorch. Complement the creamy blandness of polenta with contrasting textures and tastes.

Polenta Galettes with Pancetta and Sage

Yield: 6 servings Preparation time: 20 minutes Cooking time: 25 minutes, plus 30 minutes cooling

For the galette:

- 6 ounces pancetta, finely diced
1/2 small yellow onion, diced
2 garlic cloves, minced
6 cups chicken broth or stock
4 tablespoons unsalted butter
1 cup heavy cream
2 tablespoons finely chopped fresh sage
2 cups fine commel or polenta (not instant polenta)
1 cup finely grated Parmesan cheese
Salt to taste



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To finish:

- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
4 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil, plus more for drizzling
1/2 cup finely grated Parmesan cheese
1 shallot, julienned
3 cups baby arugula

- Line a rimmed cookie sheet or baking dish (about 17 x 12 inches) with parchment paper.
In a large sauce pot over medium-high heat, sauté the pancetta until it is almost crisp, about 8 minutes. Add the onion and sauté until translucent, about 2 minutes. Add the garlic and sauté 1 minute more.
Stir in the chicken stock, butter, cream and sage. Bring the mixture to a boil. Whisking constantly, gradually add the polenta and whisk until well combined. Cook the polenta for 8 to 10 minutes, until quite thickened, whisking constantly.
Remove from heat and whisk in the Parmesan. Season with salt. Pour the polenta into the lined cookie sheet, spreading it out evenly. Cool completely until firm, at least 30 minutes.
When cool, using a cookie cutter, ring mold or the bottom of a can, and cut the polenta into 12 circles (or squares if you don't want scraps) that are about 4 inches in diameter. Set aside at room temperature.
To make the salad: In a small bowl, whisk the olive oil with the shallots and salt. Toss with the arugula. Set aside.
To finish: In a large nonstick skillet, melt the butter over medium heat. Sauté each galette until golden brown, about 2 minutes per side.
Place 2 galettes in the center of each salad plate. Drizzle with olive oil, then sprinkle with Parmesan cheese. Divide the salad among the plates, mounding it on the galettes. Serve immediately.

Vanilla Panna Cotta with Black Mission Figs

Yield: 6 servings Preparation time: 20 minutes, plus 3 hours refrigeration Cooking time: 25 minutes

For the panna cotta:



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- 2 1/2 cups heavy cream
1/2 cup sugar
1/4 cup amaretto
1/2 vanilla bean, split and scraped of seeds
3 tablespoons cold water
1 1/4-ounce package powdered unflavored gelatin

For the fig sauce:

- 1/4 cup water
1/2 cup sugar
1/4 cup sherry vinegar
1/4 cup balsamic vinegar
12 Black Mission figs, quartered

- In a large, heavy saucepan, combine the cream, sugar, amaretto, and vanilla bean and scrapings. Bring the mixture to a boil, then take it off the heat, cover, and allow it to steep for about 15 minutes.
Meanwhile, place the water in a small bowl. Sprinkle the gelatin powder over the water and set it aside for 5 minutes.
Remove the vanilla bean and add the gelatin mixture into the hot cream, whisking until dissolved. Divide the mixture evenly among 6, 4-to-6-ounce ramekins. Cover and refrigerate the ramekins until the custards are firm, about 3 hours.
To make the fig sauce: In a small, heavy saucepan, combine the sugar and water. Bring to a boil and cook over medium-high heat until the mixture is caramel in color, about 8 minutes. (Do not stir the mixture during this process, but occasionally brush down the sides of the saucepan with a damp pastry brush, to prevent the sugar from crystallizing.) Carefully add the sherry and balsamic vinegars (it will sputter dramatically) and whisk until the caramel has dissolved and the mixture has thickened slightly, about 5 minutes (it will thicken more as it cools). Fold in the fig quarters and cool the syrup to room temperature. (This may be refrigerated overnight and brought back to room temperature; stir before using.)
To serve: Place each ramekin on a dessert plate. Top with a tablespoon or two of the fig sauce. Serve.

Corrections & Amplifications

The restaurant Bolla is located in Dallas, Texas. The Chefs at Home column that ran on WSJ.com on Aug. 7 incorrectly stated it was in Austin.

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