

# Gourmet

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THANKSGIVING FEASTS  
OLD-FASHIONED DESSERTS  
LONDON THEATER GUIDE

## IL PASTAIO

Inside a front window of IL PASTAIO, the one that appears to be sashed with rows of colored dried pasta, Lillian Nula works the fresh pasta doughs that, fed into the machine, will emerge as ribbons of *trenette* and *tagliolini* or, hand-shaped, will assume the traditional forms of *tortelloni* and *agnolotti*. She is a warm, motherly woman with curly black hair and a smile that could melt the coldest heart, and because she handles pasta expertly an observer can be forgiven for thinking that she must have absorbed the skill at her Italian mother's knee. But Señora Nula was born in El Salvador, not in Italy, and she learned from one of Los Angeles's past masters of pasta, Celestino Drago, a chef with whom she has worked for many years. At Il Pastaio, Drago's latest eating place, the sweet señora is almost as big a draw as the superlative pastas.

Only a chef as respected as Drago could get away with opening a small, crowded pasta place in Beverly Hills,

where the rich and famous, who are not used to waiting for anything, wait along with everyone else for a table to turn over. That is the way it is at Il Pastaio, which takes no reservations and where people stand shifting from foot to foot and smiling through gritted teeth because they know the pastas are worth it. Renowned for his *ristorante* Drago in Santa Monica, the Sicilian chef has put his youngest brother, twenty-two-year-old Giacomino, in charge of the kitchen. Like Celestino, Giacomino is a charmer, sometimes circulating through the room to greet the regulars or to send a complimentary glass of *vin santo* to a new face. "I say to the customers 'Il Pastaio is your restaurant. We want you to feel at home,'" Giacomino explains. And the customers take him at his word. Some prefer Il Pastaio to home and turn up to eat every day of the week.

Who wouldn't if they could? Il Pastaio was intended as a simple place, but it really isn't. The *secondi*, or entrées, may have been eliminated, but there is such an appealing selection of antipasti, salads, and soups that it is possible to eat splendidly here without ever getting to a pasta. There are also about half a dozen risottos, among the best in the city. If I had to narrow my choice to one it would be the wild mushroom risotto with *mascarpone* cheese, a taste of heaven on earth.

Drago's Sicilian specialties intrigue me most. Fried *arancine*, formed into golden rice cones instead of the typical orange-like balls, are miniature Mount Etnas that burst with beef ragout, peas, and provolone at the touch of a fork. There are mysterious Arabian overtones to the wonderful *caponata*—a tart mixture of minced eggplant, golden raisins, olives, capers, and pine nuts—and the taste is so seductive on its own that the little grilled shrimp around it are an unnecessary distraction. Another very old Arab-Sicilian idea, a sauce of garlic, basil, and tomatoes thickened with ground almonds, is the *pesto trapanese* (from the seacoast town of Trapani, which faces North Africa), naired at Il

sumptuous ceremonial dish popular at baptisms and wedding breakfasts and made in large casseroles. Here it arrives as an individual eggplant-wrapped *timballo* enclosing macaroni, meat ragout, peas, Pecorino cheese, and hard-cooked egg in a pool of tomato sauce. I am afraid the description makes it sound ponderous (which it was the one time I had it in a restaurant in Sicily), but the cooks in Il Pastaio's kitchen have angels' hands.

The *Carpaccio* so popular at Drago has made its way here, to the relief of everyone who can't imagine a meal without it. Those who shy away from eating the original raw beef or marinated raw venison versions (both first-rate) find themselves irresistibly drawn to the ones of swordfish and 'ahi. Swordfish in translucent slices served with blood orange segments and wisps of raw fennel is so delicate one would hardly know it was

don't know the first thing about it. "Look at the firm but supple texture," I'd say. "Note that the pasta does not drown in the sauce. See how sparing the kitchen is with ingredients." Then I'd order the exquisitely tender pumpkin-stuffed spinach *tortelloni* sauced with only butter and fresh sage, a Lombardian pasta preparation that needs no other embellishments and that, in fact, would be ruined by any other. Almost all the restaurant's pastas are object lessons in how pasta should be done—the broad ribbons of *pappardelle* in a rich and musky sauce of pheasant; the *gargonelli all'amatriciana*, quills of pasta nestled in a deep and earthy tomato sauce studded with *pancetta*; black and white *trenette* with little Manila clams and the surprise of shredded *arugula* in a light, briny white-wine broth; and the ravishing ravioli half-moons stuffed with lobster and zucchini. The only pasta I didn't care for

most people would protest. It is good, but I liked the hazelnut mousse cake more. And there's much to be said for a comforting *crema caramella* drizzled with a light syrup when it is fresh and well made.

By this time, there may be another Il Pastaio for Pasadenans to wait in line for. In the meantime, the Beverly Hills original is open from 11 to 11 every day but Sunday, when it is closed. (Hours like those make it easy to turn up at a slow time and have the restaurant almost to oneself.) First courses range from \$4 to \$9.50; pastas and risottos, from \$7.50 to \$12.50; and desserts are all \$5. The wine list is adequate but limited. The restaurant is non-smoking.

Il Pastaio  
400 North Cañon Drive  
Beverly Hills  
Tel. (310) 205-5444



An array of homemade pasta at Il Pastaio

A glimpse of Il Pastaio

