

San Francisco Chronicle

Cupola review: Pizza among Bay Area's best

[Michael Bauer](#) | Sunday, November 27, 2011

Salumi and sausage are among the ingredients in the carne pizza at Cupola.

At this time of year I plan my shopping weekends around the best places to eat. You have Betelnut on Union Street, A16 on Chestnut Street, Va de Vi in Walnut Creek and, at Westfield San Francisco Centre, a newer place: Cupola Pizzeria.

The restaurant took over the former Zazil space on the fourth floor. It's next door to Lark Creek Steak, another stop for a really good meal if you're in the mood for meat. In fact, the owners of the steak house, the Lark Creek Restaurant Group, are also behind Cupola, which is turning out some of the best Neapolitan pizza in the Bay Area.

Displayed near the entrance is a certificate of membership in the Associazione Verace Pizza Napoletana. According to the association's website, this is "a legal entity able to give special designation to pizzerias who meet strict requirements that respect the tradition of the art of Neapolitan pizza making."

It's unusual to get such soulful fare in a shopping mall, but it's lucky for us because if it were in a freestanding storefront, the lines would probably be around the block.

The interior of the 85-seat restaurant is in keeping with its surroundings, and looks more like Las Vegas than San Francisco, with a garish lighted menu board out front and the equally glitzy lacquered C-shaped communal table visible from the entrance. But the glitz ends at the open kitchen in the rear. This is the place for serious cooking, focused on the huge freestanding wood-fired oven that turns out soft, mellow and puffy crusts.

The crusts are judiciously topped with mostly traditional ingredients: San Marzano tomatoes, oregano, garlic (\$11) and the like, although there's also an unexpected combination of prosciutto, butternut squash, fonduta and thyme (\$16.25). For me, the best is the bianca (\$14.25), a white pizza with pecorino cheese, garlic and lardo that partly melts and gives the pie a lush, nutty taste. A close second is the arrabiata (\$15.50) with pancetta, tomatoes, a strong jolt of oregano and an equally assertive sting of chiles that lingers after the last bite.



While pizza is at the heart of the menu, Cupola proves itself to be much more than a pizzeria, offering several soups, salads and starters, including the don't-miss pulled-to-order warm mozzarella (\$11.75) served with broccoli de cicco, garlic and lemon. There's also fried calamari salad (\$16.25) and a Dome salad (\$13.75) where the tomatoes, fennel, carrots, red pepper and other ingredients are pressed into a round container and unmolded on a plate. The salad is an impressive tribute to the famed Emporium dome, and is big enough for two or more.

Feast of all Feasts

The deal of the year is Cupola's La Festa di Tutte Le Feste - The Feast of all Feasts - where chef Christian Hermsdorf cooks his way through the menu for \$30 a person. When you order it, the kitchen starts sending out signature items - appetizers, salads, pasta, pizza and a dessert. It keeps coming until you swear you won't consume another bite for at least 12 hours.

The chef decides what to serve, but also welcomes requests from the menu. Our waiter said the chef was particularly pleased we specifically asked for the pumpkin Parmesan custard terrine (\$11) because not many customers order it.

It doesn't sound like one of the sexier items on the menu, but it's so good that it will convert even those who think pumpkins are bland. The mild sweetness of the squash locks into and enhances the rich character of the cheese. The custard's creaminess is accentuated by the lively bitter note of the surrounding wilted chicory. I was also happy to have roasted chicken tortellini (\$11.75/\$17). The pasta was perfectly cooked and I loved the surrounding golden broth that leached the flavor from the chanterelles; the surprising addition of pine was subtle but contributed to the rich soup. I guess I now know what to do with my leftover Christmas tree. Other pastas also shine. Torn handkerchiefs (\$11.50/\$16.75) look as if the chef placed little squares of beige silk in a tomato sauce and topped them with garlic crumbs. The light potato gnocchi (\$12.75/\$18.75) are more rustic, surrounded by braised lamb and chunks of red kabocha squash.

Cupola also features a roast of the day, which on my visits was a slow-cooked pork shoulder (\$21.50) accented with Calabrian chiles and served with polenta and braised escarole. On an earlier visit, the similarly prepared pork was served atop a bed of shelling beans, tomatoes, olives and red peppers.

At this time of year, squash is offered in every category. Along with the previously mentioned custard and pizza, there's red curi squash in an onion broth (\$9) and butternut squash in ravioli with amaretto and brown butter (\$11.50/\$16.75).

Pumpkin even shows up in budino (\$7.50), a dessert that's a cross between a pudding and a flourless cake. It's served with an overly generous scoop of mascarpone and a topping of candied pumpkin seeds.

Unfortunately, the mascarpone has the consistency of lard and is only good when eaten with the cake, which disappears long before the garnish. The chocolate mousse that accompanies the olive oil cake (\$7.50) is also too much; it dominates the cake.

If desserts improved, Cupola would be a three-star food experience.

Service challenges

Many dishes are designed to be shared, but the restaurant is still working out the logistics of how to pull off the service. At one meal, our waiter brought a salad to be split and all we had was our already used forks to divide it. But by the last visit many of the earlier kinks had been worked out. Serving customers in a shopping mall has its own peculiarities, to be sure, but the staff maintains a friendly air while dodging shopping bags and at times maneuvering around runaway children.

You know you're in a shopping center, even though the restaurant is located on a quieter floor with Lark Creek Steak and Straits Cafe. Since the front is open diners see the historic Emporium dome that rises above Abercrombie, Herve Leger, Calvin Klein, Zare and other businesses on the floors below.

Yet, when you're in Cupola, concentrating on the seductively charred and puffy pizza and pristine salads, you almost feel as if you've stumbled upon the soul of Italy.

Cupola Pizzeria

845 Market St. (at Fifth Street, on the fourth floor of the Westfield San Francisco Centre), San Francisco (415) 896-5600 or www.cupolasf.com

Lunch and dinner 11:30 a.m.-10 p.m. daily. Beer and wine. Reservations and credit cards accepted. Four percent added to the check for San Francisco employer mandates. Difficult street parking; paid lots nearby.

Overall: Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS

Food: Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS

Service: Rating: TWO STARS

Atmosphere: Rating: TWO STARS

Prices: \$\$ (Moderate; most main courses under \$18.)

Noise rating: Noise Rating: FOUR BELLS (Can only talk in raised voices; 75-80 decibels.)

Rating: FOUR STARS Extraordinary Rating: THREE STARS Excellent Rating: TWO STARS Good Rating: ONE STAR Fair Noise Rating: BOMB Poor

The wine list

If there's one aspect to Cupola where you might suspect you're eating in a shopping mall, it's the wine selection. The list comprises just 30 choices, all available by the glass. For a casual spot this is appropriate, but the selections don't seem to reflect the range and quality of the food.

In addition, the markup is high. In most cases, the wines are more than double retail, and the selection is pretty much what you'd get at an average wine store. For example, the 2009 Byron Pinot Noir from Santa Barbara is \$10.50 a glass and \$40 a bottle, but you can get the same wine at K&L for about \$15.

A few more interesting wines, particularly if they were from Italy, would better enhance the food. It seems as if in this instance the restaurant may be buying into the mall mentality. When it comes to red Italian wines by the bottle, only four are offered and include big names such as Planeta, Renato and Allegrini.

Seven wines are also available on tap, from the 2010 Uvaggio Vermentino (\$6.50/\$19/\$34) to the 2008 Old Press Syrah (\$8.50/\$24/\$45).

Where the list does shine is with nonalcoholic selections. Diners will find several interesting zero-proof cocktails (\$5) such as the Cocolime with coconut water, key lime and soda; and the Prickly Berry Spritzer with prickly pear, lemon, blueberry and soda water. Also available are house-made lemonade (\$4.25), Italian sodas (\$4) and such things as Bundaberg ginger beer and Fever Tree ginger ale (both \$4).

Four beers are on draft (\$6.50) and 10 are sold by the bottle, including Italian favorites Peroni and Moretti. If you bring your own wine, corkage is \$15.

RATINGS KEY

FOUR STARS = Extraordinary; THREE STARS = Excellent; TWO STARS = Good; ONE STAR = Fair; NO STARS = Poor
\$ = Inexpensive: entrees \$10 and under; \$\$ = Moderate: \$11-\$17; \$\$\$ = Expensive: \$18-\$24; \$\$\$\$ = Very Expensive: more than \$25

ONE BELL = Pleasantly quiet (less than 65 decibels); TWO BELLS = Can talk easily (65-70); THREE BELLS = Talking normally gets difficult (70-75); FOUR BELLS = Can talk only in raised voices (75-80); BOMB = Too noisy for normal conversation (80+)

Prices are based on main courses. When entrees fall between these categories, the prices of appetizers help determine the dollar ratings. Chronicle critics make every attempt to remain anonymous. All meals are paid for by The Chronicle. Star ratings are based on a minimum of three visits. Ratings are updated continually based on at least one revisit.

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