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GRAZIE FOR THE MEMORIES

For Schwa's Michael Carlson, a tiny Florentine restaurant rose to the top

Schwa chef and owner Michael Carlson is synonymous with memorable meals—conceptualizing them, cooking them, eating them, talking about them.

Named one of the country's best new chefs last year by Food & Wine magazine, Carlson recalls a dinner in Italy nine years ago as the best meal he's ever had.

At the time, he was in his early 20s and had spent time under Paul Bartolotta, then the chef at Spiaggia. Bartolotta made arrangements for Carlson to live and work in Italy.

In Florence, he headed for Osteria del Cinghiale Bianco—"restaurant of the white wild boar"—a tiny hole-in-the-wall with exposed-brick walls near the famed Ponte Vecchio. To get to their table, Carlson and his dinner companion climbed a ladder to a secluded cove near the ceiling.

The cuisine was classic Florentine. "Awe-inspiring," he says.

They started with the cold sausage of the restaurant's namesake: wild boar with slices of parmesan Reggiano. Next came *pappa al pomodoro*, a tomato-bread soup.

"It was real simple but had just killer, killer, killer flavors," Carlson recalls. "I'd had the soup 20 times before that, and it didn't taste like this. Someone took the time to make it to order, and it came across."

Then came cow tripe with *borlotti* beans and tomatoes. "It blew my mind. I absolutely fell in love with it," he says. A pasta course was next: *pappardelle* with—what else?—wild boar ragu. Then the piece de resistance: a T-bone *bisteca alla Fiorentina* with potatoes. There was no room for dessert, just coffee.

"All the great dinners I've had—at Alinea, Fat Duck—the food is great," Carlson says. "But it's not necessarily always about the food. Some of the best dinners I've had had to do with . . . the ambience, who you're with, why you're there."

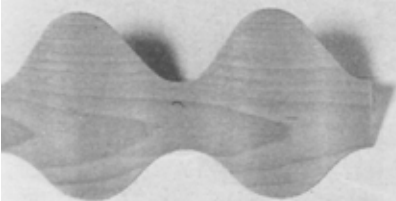
—Kevin Pang
kpang@tribune.com

And to drink:

Carlson recommends a Portuguese *vinho verde*; try a 2005 *Melgaco Terra Antigua*. A crisp French *Sancerre* is a more classic pairing for tripe. Look for a *Henry Natter* or other flinty white.

—Bill Daley





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