

trattoria town

Small is beautiful in Sydney these days, thanks to the new breed of neighbourhood trattoria that blends cosy spaces and simple, regional flavours. Here's a taste from four of our favourites.

PHOTOGRAPHY MARK ROPER & BEN DEARNLEY
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da gianni



After attracting attention at Paddington's Bistro Moore, and brief stints at Ecco in Drummoyne and Jaspers in Hunters Hill, roaming chef Giovanni Spinazzola (pictured) has finally settled into his own restaurant. And what's more, Da Gianni Trattoria in Annandale is just streets away from his own neighbourhood in Leichhardt, Sydney's Little Italy.

Part of the inspiration for Giovanni's menu stems from his mum's Southern Italian cooking. "I don't try to create new dishes, I bring the classics back to life," Giovanni explains of this dish. "I learnt to make the sauce in Rome, and the gnocchi is made just like Mum's." *Da Gianni Trattoria, 127 Booth St, Annandale, NSW, (02) 9660 6652.*



**potato gnocchi with
gorgonzola, asparagus
and walnuts**

Serves 4-6

2 bunches asparagus,
woody ends trimmed, halved
2 cups (500ml) pure (thin) cream
100g gorgonzola piccante cheese*,
roughly chopped
1/2 cup (40g) grated parmesan,
plus extra to serve
500g homemade potato gnocchi
(see recipe p 75) or good-quality
bought gnocchi
1 cup (100g) walnut halves, toasted,
chopped

Bring a large saucepan of salted water to the boil. Blanch asparagus for 2 minutes, remove with tongs, then refresh in iced water. Return cooking water to the boil.

Warm cream and gorgonzola in a pan on low heat for 2-3 minutes, crushing cheese with a fork so it melts into cream. Stir in parmesan until smooth.

Meanwhile, cook gnocchi in the boiling water in 2 batches. Remove with a slotted spoon when they rise to surface (30-60 seconds). Place on a plate and repeat with remaining gnocchi. Add gnocchi to sauce with nuts and asparagus. Toss gently on low heat for 1 minute to warm through. Serve with extra parmesan and pepper.

* A strong Italian blue cheese, from delis.



a tavola



Since opening in Darlinghurst's vibrant Victoria Street last August, A Tavola, which means 'to the table', has been living up to its name – drawing huge crowds to the stunning 10-metre long marble centrepiece for chef Eugenio Maiale's rustic Italian fare.

Eugenio (pictured), who came to Sydney from Adelaide three years ago, tries to visit Italy every year. "Wherever I go, I eat humble comfort food," he enthuses. With family strewn from Florence to Abruzzo and Sicily, it's no wonder his menu traipses happily from housemade pastas with earthy ragus to lighter seafood offerings such as these delicate *polpette di tonno*, which Eugenio learnt how to cook from his aunt in Sicily.

"That's the beauty of A Tavola – I take the best of the north, the middle and the south," he exclaims, which explains why seats at that sleek communal table are so hard to score.

A Tavola, 348 Victoria St, Darlinghurst, (02) 9331 7871.





**tuna polpette
with salmoriglio**

Serves 4 (makes 16)

Salmoriglio is a Sicilian herb salsa.

250g tuna fillet, cut into 2.5cm cubes
1/2 tsp ground cinnamon
100ml olive oil
2 tbs pine nuts
1 large (70g) egg, lightly beaten
2/3 cup (50g) stale breadcrumbs,
plus 1 tbs extra if needed
1/2 cup (40g) freshly grated parmesan
Zest and juice of 1/2 lemon
1 cup flat-leaf parsley, chopped
2 1/2 tsp chopped fresh oregano
1/2 small onion, finely chopped
2 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
400g can whole tomatoes
Rocket, to garnish (optional)
Crusty bread, to serve

Salmoriglio

1 small anchovy fillet
1 small garlic clove
2 sage leaves
1/2 tsp fresh rosemary leaves
1/4 cup (60ml) extra virgin olive oil
1 tsp fresh oregano leaves
1 1/2 tbs lemon juice

For salsa, pound anchovy, garlic, sage and rosemary to a paste in a mortar and pestle (or finely chop together). Stir in oil, oregano and juice, then season. Stand for at least 1 hour.

Meanwhile, season tuna with salt, pepper and cinnamon. Heat 2 tbs oil in a pan over medium heat. Add tuna and pine nuts and cook, turning, for 1 minute or until nuts are toasted and tuna is seared but still pink in centre. Cool in a bowl for 5 minutes, then add

egg, crumbs, cheese, zest and juice, half the parsley and 1 1/2 tsp oregano. Mix well with your hands, breaking up the tuna, until the tuna is incorporated and mixture holds together – add extra crumbs if too sticky. With wet hands, roll sixteen 4cm-diameter balls. Chill on a lined tray for 30 minutes.

Heat 1 tbs oil in a large pan over low heat. Cook onion and garlic, stirring, for 10 minutes until soft. Add tomato and remaining parsley and oregano. Season, bring to boil and simmer 15 minutes. Cool slightly, then blend until smooth. Season and keep warm.

Heat remaining 2 tbs oil in a large frypan over medium heat. Add polpette and cook for 2-3 minutes, turning, until light golden. Add to sauce and stir to coat. Serve on rocket if desired, with salmoriglio and crusty bread.



VICINI

An atmospheric corner terrace in Annandale may be a long way from his hometown of Biella, at the foot of the Italian Alps, but for chef Massimiliano Borsato (pictured), his menu remains true to his roots.

“At Vicini you get a feel for *la cucina vera* – the true cuisine of Italy,” he says. Drawing on Sydney’s diverse produce, Massimiliano offers simple regional fare, like this steak with mushrooms and rosemary. He lets the natural ingredients define the dish, in the same way the food of his childhood did. “In autumn we’d pick fresh porcini, then cook them in our woodfired oven with meat, with sauces made from herbs from our garden.”

For Vicini’s owners George Hatzimihail and Natalie Keon, Massimiliano’s relaxed food is the ideal fit for their family-friendly eatery. “It’s the kind of place you can bring kids for pizza, come for a leisurely brunch, or have dinner upstairs,” says Natalie.

Vicini, 37 Booth St, Annandale, (02) 9660 6600.



beef fillet with mixed mushrooms and spinach

Serves 4

2 tbs olive oil, plus extra to drizzle
4 x 200g beef eye fillet steaks
400g mixed mushrooms (such as oyster, field or porcini), sliced if large
4 garlic cloves, chopped
3 rosemary sprigs, plus small sprigs to garnish
6 thyme sprigs
1 cup (250ml) dry red wine
100g unsalted butter, chopped
4 handfuls (about 200g) baby spinach

Preheat the oven to 180°C. Heat 2 teaspoons oil in a large ovenproof frypan over medium-high heat. Add the steaks and brown for 2 minutes on each side, then briefly sear the edges. Scatter mushrooms, garlic, rosemary, thyme,

salt and pepper around the steaks, drizzle with remaining oil and transfer to the oven for a further 10 minutes for medium-rare, or until cooked to your liking. Remove steak and mushrooms from pan and rest, covered, in a warm place for 8 minutes. Remove and discard herbs, leaving any juices in the pan.

Return pan to the stove over medium heat, add wine and bring to the boil. Add half the butter and stir constantly for 1-2 minutes until the butter is well incorporated and the sauce is smooth.

Meanwhile, place spinach in a pan over medium-high heat with remaining butter, season with salt and pepper, then stir for 1-2 minutes until wilted.

To serve, divide spinach among plates, then top with the steak and mushrooms. Drizzle with jus and a little olive oil, then garnish with extra rosemary sprigs.



il piave



There was never any doubt that Vanessa Martin (pictured) would become a chef. "I've been baking tarts since I was 10," the confirmed sweet-tooth reveals. When you consider her father's Venetian background and her mother's penchant for biscuits and cakes, it explains why Il Piave (which Vanessa runs with her brother, Robert) is known for its luscious desserts as well as smart pastas. Their father helps out in the kitchen, too, Vanessa explains: "Peeling potatoes, stuffing zucchini flowers, making stocks – all those fiddly things."

After nine successful years at Il Piave, the Martins have branched out, running Cicheti restaurant (named for the Venetian-style tapas they serve) at The Monkey Bar down the road. Along with a regular bar menu, small tastes include eggplant involtini, and scallop-and-prawn-filled zucchini flowers.

Il Piave, 639 Darling St, Rozelle, (02) 9810 6204.



chocolate & hazelnut
crostata

Makes 8

350g good-quality dark chocolate
(70% cocoa solids), chopped
160g unsalted butter, chopped
2 tbs hazelnut spread (such as Nutella)
4 eggs
1/3 cup (75g) caster sugar
2 tbs hazelnut meal
Vanilla gelato, chopped strawberries and
chocolate sauce, to serve

Pastry

3 1/3 cups (500g) plain flour
1 cup (150g) icing sugar
250g chilled unsalted butter, chopped
2 eggs

For pastry, process flour, sugar and butter in a food processor until mixture resembles fine breadcrumbs. With motor running, add eggs one at a time, then process until dough comes together in a ball – if too dry, add 2 tsp cold water at a time until it comes together. Gently knead on a floured bench until smooth. Enclose in plastic wrap. Chill for 30 minutes.

Preheat oven to 200°C. Divide pastry into 8 balls, then roll out into 1cm-thick circles. Use to line eight 8cm loose-bottomed tart pans, pressing pastry into base and sides with your fingers. Trim any excess and prick bases with a fork. Line pastry with baking paper and fill with pastry weights or uncooked rice. Bake for 10-12 minutes until firm but not coloured, then remove paper and weights. Bake for 5 minutes or until crisp. Cool in pans.

For filling, melt chocolate, butter and hazelnut spread in a heatproof bowl over a pan of simmering water (don't let bowl touch water). Remove from heat and whisk gently to combine. Beat eggs and sugar with an electric mixer until pale and thick. Use a handwhisk to mix meal into melted chocolate, followed by the egg mixture. Pour into tart shells. Bake for 12-15 minutes until risen and slightly firm. Cool for 5 minutes, then serve with gelato, berries and sauce, if desired. **d.**

