

a tavola

THE FOOD YOU WANT WITH THE FLAVOURS YOU CRAVE
MAKES A TAVOLA A SYDNEY DINING STAPLE.

Seeking shelter and sustenance on a wet Sydney eve, the scene at A Tavola is entirely appealing. The soft hum of diners conversing over glasses of red and steaming bowls of pasta is like a wax-sealed invitation, as staff warmly welcome you into the space.

Backlit ribbons of pappardelle, made that morning, hang like artwork in the kitchen window at the head of a communal marble table, creating a curtain between worker and the diner. Giant copper Tom Dixon lights hang above the table, below, terracotta dishes are home to heads of garlic, giving the dining room a distinctly honest feel.

Halfway through our meal we notice an industrial parmesan grater attached to one side of the table, while the all-important pasta machine is clamped to another. This is when the mod light fittings begin to feel more like a clever nod to the dangling copper pots and pans suspended in a rustic kitchen.

For head chef and owner Eugenio Maiale, cooking has always been a family affair. His mother has been integral in his food education, teaching him to make pasta, cooking alongside him in his two Adelaide restaurants, and coming to Sydney to help establish A Tavola: "She was always telling me my serves were too small," Eugenio laughs. Many of the recipes here are hers – the bread, the pastas, the sauces. "Mum had to go back to Adelaide six weeks after the opening as her husband could not survive any longer without her cooking," he says.

A Tavola's menu comprises just three entrées, three pastas, three salads and some olives, and has done since the Darlinghurst diner thrust open its doors in 2007. These faithfuls are complemented with a specials list, developed around the seasonal produce.

However it's the pasta that A Tavola is really renowned for. "Each morning there is someone here by 9am, rolling out pasta," says Eugenio. "The sheet of pasta runs the entire length of the table," he adds, pointing at the 10-metre marble stunner. So it stands to reason that when dining at A Tavola, you must try the pasta.

The gnocchi with cauliflower is outrageously moreish – tiny pillows that are light and springy meet with a delicate, slow-cooked cauliflower puree, studded with fried florets, truffled pecorino and pangrattato. Then there is the lamb ragu with pappardelle – silky, wide ribbons and a bold, in-your-face sauce with wedges of dissolving lamb. It's the sort of plate you wish would never end, and you want a big glass of red to enjoy between bites. Fortunately, the all-Italia wine list can help. While concise, it is utterly quaffable, its brevity somewhat of a relief in the days where many wine lists come in volumes.

Dessert is fried ricotta. It's a bit like a posh doughnut (sans hole), but the salad stack of super-fine slices of apple and strawberry makes it really interesting, their sharp freshness a reminder of how incredibly good ingredients can be when treated simply.

"I wanted to create a restaurant where you could come and have a good bowl of pasta," says Eugenio. "Here you can eat and dine – it's as if you were eating at my family table at home."

And Eugenio's mum will no doubt be pleased to hear that we did not leave his table hungry.

BOX BRIEF

WHERE ■ 348 Victoria Street, Darlinghurst

CHEF ■ Eugenio Maiale

CROWD ■ 30-somethings, friends having a catch-up, locals known by their first names

TASTE ■ If there is a ragu on offer, that's what you're having

HOURS ■ Dinner served Monday to Saturday, lunch served Fridays only

WORTH IT ■ It's fancy and delicious comfort food, better than you'll cook and a helluva lot quicker

BONUS ROUND ■ Beyond the front room lies a covered courtyard, and upstairs there is another room perfect for larger groups

FAMOUS FACES ■ Cate Blanchett, Hugo Weaving, Rick Stein, Maggie Beer or Christine Manfield have all sat at A Tavola

