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Article Published: Wednesday, February 16, 2005
dining review

Wine, food and customers at Frasca get the utmost care

By Kyle Wagner
Denver Post Dining Critic

Boulder - From now on, my life will be divided into two time periods: before I ate at Frasca and after I ate at Frasca.



Post / Helen H. Richardson

Frasca in Boulder emphasizes wine paired with northeastern Italian food. Its owners worked at the famous Napa Valley restaurant The French Laundry.

This restaurant exudes a generosity of spirit and the diner feels ministered to, inspiring this critic to write an unprecedented rave.

Frasca proves that diners can discover the profound when a restaurant uses classic techniques, simple, straightforward execution and the best ingredients available.

That philosophy applies to the kitchen or the dining room, the wine glass or the plate, the server or the busboy.

It's not about conspicuous consumption. It is about treating food (and people) with as much respect as possible and then appreciating it (and them).

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Frasca opened in Boulder in August without much fanfare, although it certainly had every right to

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Close out – Aurora The Conservatory

tap its own wine glass with a knife to get our attention. Owners Bobby Stuckey and Lachlan

Mackinnon-Patterson have an impressive set of credentials between them.

Stuckey is one of the 60 members of the American Court of Master Sommeliers, and he and chef Mackinnon-Patterson are both alumni of The French Laundry, the restaurant that has changed the palette of American dining (and the palates of American diners) from its Napa Valley home in Yountville, Calif., almost from the moment it opened in 1994.

Stuckey also had spent a half-dozen years as the sommelier at the Little Nell in Aspen, and he and Mackinnon-Patterson spent several months working in Boulder's Mateo last year before taking over this space a few blocks off the Pearl Street Mall that was the Corner Gourmet.

In creating a home for their offerings, the pair wisely decided to go understated with white, brown and black, starting with the brown leather curtain at the front door that keeps the cold from edging into the warm dining area. It gives a dramatic entree to the space, and it signals the staff to be there every time for the welcome.

Toward the center of the dining room sits a rustic wooden table with a vase that holds oversized forsythia branches. They symbolize the restaurant's name, which refers to informal gathering places in an area of Italy called Friuli-Venezia Giulia, where farmers, friends and families once ate and drank during the harvest.

Frascas were identified by branches hanging over doorways, indicating that a barn or house was open for such a meal. Although such get-togethers are rare in these modern times, Stuckey and Mackinnon-Patterson evoke their simplicity and conviviality here.

Since Stuckey is a master sommelier, Frasca is very much about wine. Each diner is offered a complimentary tajut (tah-JOOT, the "j" as in Taj Mahal), which means "a cut" or small amount (in this case 3 ounces) of Tocai Friulano, a mild white that is a pleasure to sip while perusing the menu.

The whole by-the-glass roster is also available tajut-sized, and diners can opt to have their courses paired for them. Or pick a bottle from the delightful list, any of which will be a bargain, since no wine is listed at more than \$20 over retail.

- Lucky Strike Bowling alley tosses spares and gutter balls
- Cheap Eats: Taki's
- Two tasty takes on a treasure
- Cheap eats: Eggshell Cherry Creek
- Cheap eats: Back Home
- Palace Arms Brown Palace star still lustrous experience
- Ambitious Windsor eatery lacks consistency
- Cheap eats - The Turntable
- Cheap eats: Pantaleone's New York Pizza
- Cheap Eats: Nonna's Bistro
- Kelly finds the right fit at tiny room on 6th
- Cheap Eats: Casa Alvarez
- Pantuso: Big portions, fair price
- Simple food's good at Noodle House
- Cheap Eats: Sunrise, Sunset
- Classic excels by its own zeal
- Jasinski and her distaff staff launch Rioja
- Cheap Eats: Benedict's
- Sushi Yokozuna worth return visit
- Cheap Eats: CityPub South
- Cantonese menu revels in seafood
- Cheap Eats: Old Siam
- Nothing new, but charms wins out
- Cheap Eats: HandleBar & Grill
- Cheap Eats
- Moda's setting balances spotty menu
- Cheap Eats
- Table 6: PR creation survives the hype
- Cheap Eats: Jack 'n' Grill
- Salad bars offer a fresh idea
- Cheap Eats
- Cheap Eats
- Cafe Paprika gets better and better
- Beano's Cabin a luxe Romper Room
- Cheap Eats
- Bar grub gets the job done
- 3 Squares
- Pedigreed fixings, average results
- 3 Squares

There are 200 varieties from wineries and makers you have and haven't heard of.

Stuckey, 35, is also just about the least stuck-up sommelier you're likely to encounter. Asking him for advice on a wine is like asking your bud from college to stop by the table and tell you if the new Eminem is worth checking out.

Mackinnon-Patterson is young too (29), so it's a surprise that he already seems to have such an understanding of the importance of showcasing stellar ingredients at their peaks, and he tells us on the menu where he gets them. At Frasca, this doesn't come off as pretentious. Instead, he pays homage to the farmers because he knows how to use their foods.

In other words, he doesn't mess with things too much, instead figuring out what flavors will match well with each other and then letting them go. There was never a brown lettuce leaf to be seen, a sliver of fruit that didn't explode with ripeness.

He and Stuckey have chosen to dedicate Frasca to the foods and wines of the Friuli region, a part of Italy that sits way up in the northeast and has the unique position of being Italian influenced by the bordering fare of Austria and Slovenia, with the seafood and the salt of the Adriatic Sea.

It's akin to someone going to Rome to open an American restaurant and announcing that it features the foods and wines of Puget Sound.

Mackinnon-Patterson's travels through Italy, his time at the French Laundry and three years in France have given him the courage to go ahead and make his own ricotta (\$9) and put it with a piece of perfectly ripe quince marinated in brown butter, so that the rich edges of the butter cut into the fruit. It was bold and creamy, and it made us say, "Oh, my God," in a way that was at once reverential and sacrilegious.

And it turned out to be that way with so much of Mackinnon-Patterson's food. Smoked minestrone (\$9) came with that ricotta made into little dumplings, and a leek salad, tiny, diced vegetables al dente in a densely flavored broth that was part curative elixir and part Nonna's brew. Soft heirloom polenta (\$10) with mushroom broth and onion salad wasn't just "soft," it was a case for the inadequacies of thesauruses, because "plush," "velvety" and "cushiony" just don't cut it.

Grilled Maine sea scallops (\$14) had the same texture as the polenta, but were matched so well with achingly sweet-tart red grapefruit that I wondered why the fruit isn't actually a sea vegetable so the darned things can just be caught and cooked together all the time. Long Acre Ranch prime beef salad (\$11) with romaine and Parmesan

- Where else can you get an "elkrito"?

- 3 Squares

- Sushi suffers from quickie approach

- 3 Squares- Food

- Sorry food, nasty attitude at deli

- The burger's the thing

- Grille as good as any steakhouse

- 3 Squares

- It's the season for chef's creations

- You won't get soaked at swimclub

- Dictate at Mao: Asian done well

- Zesty fare is a wrap

- Vive la fine French restaurants!

- 3 Squares

- Oliveto authentic Southern Italian fare

- Tiny Café Bisque's food scores big

- 3 squares

- Mizuna best place to end diet

- Bull & Bush solid after 33-year run

- 3 Squares

- Kabul Kabob: Bridging cultures

- Swift's dishes out regular food regularly

- Aspen eateries spiff up

- Phat Thai hot, sweet and salty

- The Wild Fig: Rough around edges

- N. Mexican fare packs heat

- Hangers-on learn lesson

- Masterful touches at Brix bistro

- Happy hour's the time to visit Trios

- Chill out with some cool salads

- It could pay to keep tabs on check

- Factory spaghetti tastes like it, too

- Columbine Steak House big on meat

- Dining alfresco? Try this sampler

- 3 Squares

- Mix puts zing in Zengo

- Local favorite Racines returns

- Red Lobster: It's for everybody

- Local noodle spots do just fine

- Sandwich rises to masterpiece

vinaigrette, visually my least favorite dish, brought beef so well-textured that eating meat cold all the time could become a trend.

The menu, which changes as often as weekly, announces that "21 Orders" of the house-made chestnut agnolotti (\$16) are made each night, and woe to you if you are No. 22. Chestnut is little used in this country, and that's so sad, because it's such a sweet, nutty taste. Here, smoky bacon and a slightly sweet celery root broth catches the other flavors in its earthy depths so that when all of the moist little pasta pockets are gone, you get to enjoy them all over with some of bread, so smartly thinly sliced here.

If you've never eaten pork belly, this is the place to do it. In the purest terms, it's bacon in all its fatty, uncured glory, and at Frasca it comes braised (\$22), sliced about a half-inch thick and set atop hedgehog mushrooms and apple chutney for a smoky-sweet combination that makes you wish breakfast habits would change in a hurry.

No less heady is preserved leg of Ken Macy lamb (\$23), done stufato (stew) style, with silky bubbles of puréed potato sharing space in the lamb-sweet broth.

Elsewhere, dessert can be a letdown, but pastry chef Brendan Sodikoff (another French Laundry alum) and his staff of Megan Rule and Brad Yeomans, who handles the house-made gelatos and sorbetti, pull off the finales with aplomb.

The peanut butter cup (\$6) is the one to have. An egg-shaped gelato of Valrhona chocolate was surrounded by a moat of warm peanut butter and chocolate froth. The half-dozen ice creams and sorbets (\$2 per scoop) are well-crafted as well, and the tarts (\$6-\$8) use the fresh fruit of the day.

And the last, but certainly not least, part of the dining experience, the service, is so well done at Frasca that it almost deserves its own review.

When courses needed to be hurried or held off, they were. Water was poured when some had been drunk, not when the glass was empty or one sip had been taken. Flatware arrived before the food, not at the same time or after. No one got whacked in the back with a server's rear end, and information was shared as though by a confidante, not a professor or a tired actor wannabe.

The servers here are self-aware, not self-important. The meal isn't about them or about the restaurant. It's about the diner, and what the diner wants and needs.

Every server reading this should read that paragraph again.

- This Lobster rocks
- You'll find no McMexican at Arcos
- Celebrate with Mother
- Rhino eatery goes retro
- Chef Jasinski going to Larimer St.
- One big Happy Family
- Menus abloom with spring specials
- Dive into a bounty of Mideast delights
- Popular bakery offers natural breads, quiches
- Nectar's promises come up empty
- Low-carb store opens in Lakewood
- Snacks are where it's at for Mezcal
- Drive-by dining
- Yard House hit-and-miss
- Tight room, good food at Amore
- Another Sunrise for doughnut fans
- Michelle's mixed bag of entrées and treats
- Vodkas take stage at Red Square
- Vue diners enjoy the lap of luxury
- Asian environs home at John Holly
- Agave: Everything except the food works
- Greek clan serves big fat steaks
- Tasty burgers, chilly atmosphere
- Yummy Yummy Tasty Thai is!
- At Ted's, bison roam freely over tasty menu
- From food to service, Cliff House casts spell
- This upscale grocery can put gourmet dinner on the table
- Babysitter not needed for kid-friendly spots
- Sup on Italian fare, subs and super desserts in colorful pizzeria
- Blue River Bistro lays it on a little heavy
- Evergreen's new Kody yet to arrive
- Two places to satisfy craving for pho
- Bistro or Brasserie, Rouge is in the pink
- L'Atelier rich tribute to Cerny's artistry
- Pei Wei has all the right foods and moves
- Take out and Drive-by dining columns
- Emma's fine-tunes a

And other restaurants should be on notice. After 14 years of reviewing, some might call me a little cranky. But before Frasca, I was willing to settle. Now, after Frasca, we'd all be crazy to.

Dining critic Kyle Wagner can be reached at 303-820-1958 or kwagner@denverpost.com.

Frasca

ITALIAN|1738 Pearl St., Boulder, 303-442-6966|

Atmosphere: Brown, black and white, fresh flowers and a sense of being someplace special.

Service: Simultaneously fluid and precise, with a flair for pampering.

Wine list: No bottle priced more than \$20 over retail, with 200 varieties chosen equally from famous and lesser-known vineyards and winemakers.

Dinner entrees: \$15-\$28

Hours: 5:30 p.m. to close Monday-Saturday

Details: All major credit cards; street parking; medium noisy; no smoking; wheelchair accessible; reservations strongly suggested.

Three visits

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