

MAY 2009 • 3.95

The Over-Mischiever

Hornitos sneaks
tequila into
classic cocktails

Johny Chow switches out
vodka for Hornitos Plata
to make a HorniKazie at
L.A.'s Viper Room



RESULTS INSIDE:
2009 S.F. World
Spirits Competition



The dining room at Drago Centro, designed by Felderman Keatinge + Associates.

Drago Centro

story and photos by David Gadd

Chef
Celestino
Drago's new
Los Angeles
restaurant
is a gem

“I always had a love for Downtown,” says cherubic L.A. super-chef Celestino Drago, with a twinkle in his eye. The white-clad, white-haired restaurateur came to Los Angeles from his native Sicily in 1979 and has never looked back. Owner of the revered Drago in Santa Monica, as well as spinoffs Enoteca Drago and Il Pastaio in Beverly Hills, Celestino now finds himself spending much of his time at his new Downtown venue, Drago Centro, a stunning 9,500-square-footer located at City National Plaza.

The full-block business center, built in 1972 as world headquarters for ARCO, consists of two soaring towers between which lie a plaza and a glass-cased “jewel box”—a former Bank of America branch that now houses Drago Centro. “The owner of the building had always pictured a first-class restaurant here,” explains the chef. Landlord cooperation resulted in lots of leeway in restructuring the building to fit Celestino’s idea of the perfect restaurant.

For the design, the chef’s mind was made up: “I knew exactly what I wanted, and I knew exactly the person I wanted to talk to—Stanley Felderman.” Principal of Felderman Keatinge + Associates, Felderman had

done a few other restaurants but had never worked with Drago. Thanks to the duo’s shared vision, the relationship jelled as easily as Celestino’s famed vanilla panna cotta.

“He’s a modernist,” says Celestino. “I told him I wanted a restaurant that, a few years from now, wasn’t going to look tired. I also wanted a place that would reflect my mentality, my food and the culture and architecture of Italy.” At early meetings, Felderman presented swatch books full of materials that foretold the eventual look of Drago Centro: boldly patterned flocked wallpaper, muted colors, rich stone and leather and eye-catching fixtures such as black Murano glass chandeliers. “I’d give him an idea, and he would embellish it,” the chef recalls.

Felderman, whose parents owned a restaurant, was a natural for the project. “Being from New York,” the architect says, “I wanted it to have an urban feel.” But there were challenges. “It was a long, narrow space, with no infrastructure for a restaurant,” Felderman says; “and we had to drill through a three-foot concrete wall to access the Vault Room. It was a chore.” But the designer, who also did much of the restaurant’s artwork, is happy with the end

result. "What I like is that you can sit anywhere; there's no Siberia."

"I wanted a centerpiece in the restaurant," states Celestino, "but it had to be a functional centerpiece." The result was the impressive glass wine tower. Rising 16 feet at the center of the main room, the tower appears to pass through the ceiling; it houses 3,000 bottles, mostly Italian reds from the restaurant's extensive list.

Two private rooms have unique identities. The Flower Room, named for the restaurant's address on Flower Street, is an intimate space for 16 that features a square table, a dark velvet-covered wall and ideally balanced lighting. The more functional Vault Room, formerly the bank's vault, is a sleek demonstration kitchen and dining room wired with state-of-the-art audio-visual capabilities so wine producers, visiting cooks or other clients can make presentations while guests eat.

Thanks to its classic but leading-edge design—and to Celestino's



Chef Celestino Drago (left) with Chef de Cuisine Ian Gresik.

celestial cuisine—Drago Centro has been a smash success since it opened last December. "We're already doing three times the business for dinner that was projected in our initial plan," says the modest chef. And 8,000 workers in the office towers provide a ready-made lunch crowd. As Celestino sums it up: "We're learning about Downtown." ■■

Drago Centro Beverage Director Michael Shearin

As THE TASTING PANEL arrives at Drago Centro one Tuesday afternoon, Wine Director Michael Shearin is busy tasting with reps from Joseph Phelps and Merryvale Vineyards. Stefano Mangiarotti, North American Sales & Marketing Manager for Amarone producer Bertani, is coming in later. Being responsible for the wine, beer and spirits programs at what has become one of Los Angeles's premier destination restaurants puts Shearin in the limelight. "I wind up buying from nearly 50 different vendors to get uniqueness in our list," says Shearin, "so that means a lot of tastings. I meet with reps about three days a week."



Drago Centro's Beverage Director, Michael Shearin, with a bottle of Gaja Sorì Tildin in front of the restaurant's wine tower.

The Nevada native hopped from bellman at Mandalay Bay to Vegas wine gigs at Thomas Keller's Bouchon and Tom Colicchio's Craftsteak, finally landing as head sommelier at Guy Savoy. "We were really looking to find the right person for this project," says Celestino Drago. "I talked to everybody and spread the word around. Then a phone call comes from Las Vegas. Michael flew in the next day; we sat down and talked, and I was very impressed with his knowledge of wine: 'OK, you're in!'"

Shearin built the impressive 600-label wine list at Drago Centro on a base of selections from Drago's Santa Monica restaurant, along with deep verticals of older vintages from Celestino's private cellar. "This gave us the opportunity to build depth right off the bat," comments Shearin.

With 90 percent of wine sales being Italian labels, Shearin hand-sells a large number of wines from Italy's more obscure appellations, "some made from grapes that people definitely don't know about—grapes like Erbaluce that are ancient in those regions and not even known outside their own terroirs." The wine guru was determined that if the restaurant were going to have a list that represented all of Italy, he would have the best bottles from each region. "It was easy to fill out Piedmont and Tuscany, but who's doing great things in Calabria and Abruzzo?"

The fit at Drago Centro seems ideal for Shearin. "I had looked at Southern California, but had just never found the right project," says Shearin. "My career was going well in Las Vegas and I didn't necessarily want to derail that, but everything just fell into place with Drago Centro."