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Celestino Drago's New City Cuisine: Gravity of Centro

A Perino's for 2010 and beyond, plus the most glamorous view in L.A.

By **Jonathan Gold**

Published on March 18, 2009 at 2:16pm

View more photos in the Drago Centro slideshow.



Octo-power: Drago Centro's tentacle-topped risotto

The most glamorous urban view in the city, a backdrop that **Gene Kelly** might have danced against, that **Georgia O'Keeffe** might have painted before she moved out to the desert, belongs to **Drago Centro** — the ziggurat of the downtown library rising past the crenelated red sculpture in the courtyard, office towers gleaming through massive picture windows. Planted at the base of a formerly sterile office plaza, Centro may be the

grandest new restaurant in this neighborhood since the early 1980s, a sprawling former bank space blown out into a double-height modernist dining room, punctuated in the middle by a glassed-in wine vault, softened only a little by the black chandeliers and biomorphic hanging

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pendants that still make *Dwell* subscribers whip out their checkbooks.

The patio at Spago speaks of Southern California's sybaritic ease; the dining room at Sona of exquisitely calibrated grace. At Drago Centro, **Stanley Felderman's** design breathes nothing but power, a vision of the city laid out to flatter the men and women who own so much of it. And while on paper this is less canny than it probably seemed two years ago in the planning stage, it is still a view the rest of us can rent for the price of a Negroni, the illusion of command and control.

If you have been following Los Angeles restaurants for a while, you may be as familiar with **Celestino Drago's** cooking as you are with your own, from the stylish modern Italian food at the old Chianti Cucina to the hay-and-straw pasta at his original Celestino in the 1980s, from Il Pastaio's beet risotto and squid ink to the revelatory l'Arancino, which specialized in the cooking of his native Sicily. (When I'm depressed, I sometimes imagine that I am looking at a plate of l'Arancino's watermelon mousse studded with dark-chocolate "seeds.") Drago helped to define the new breed of Italian steak houses at **Celestino Steak**, and **Enoteca Drago** is still one of the best wine bars in town. His Drago in **Santa Monica** is perennially among the better Italian restaurants in California. His siblings preside over a substantial food empire of their own, albeit one whose light touch, wild flavors and deftness with fresh pasta are very much in Drago's tradition.

Drago Centro is a different kind of place, less specifically Italian than Italian-inflected, less driven by handcrafted pasta than by steaks sourced from the one guy in America ranching real Piemontese cattle, less centered around risotto than around mussels steamed in white wine with a stinging lash of black pepper, foie gras transformed into a trembling crème caramel, or an enormous chop of American pastured veal, garnished with nuggets of fried sweetbreads and plopped onto a saucy ragout of green lentils that leans more toward Paris than Milan. Since the 1930s, the grandest restaurants in Los Angeles have tended to be run by Italians whose menus respect few borders. (Chef de cuisine **Ian Gresik** was formerly best known for his long term as pastry chef at Patina. It is safe to say that he did not learn his craft on the knee of an Italian grandmother.)

Drago Centro is the newest generation of this sort of luxurious dining, a Perino's for 2010 and beyond. Even in the midst of the downturn, the private dining rooms are packed solid with bankers and corporate lawyers who just can't face the thought of another meal at the California or Jonathan clubs, who would rather experience the



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tremulous sweetness of raw langoustine with citrus; of a thin, golden plinth of Milanese-style crisped saffron risotto topped with a Bellini-esque tableau of braised octopus tentacles; of *garganelli* with fresh pork sausage or roasted beets tossed with crunchy cubes of focaccia than their 14th caesar salad of the year. The chicken is crusted with truffles, and the sage-infused, focaccia-stuffed quail incomparably deep in flavor, even if it is cooked far beyond the bloody, bawdy rare.

Is Drago Centro perfect? Not quite. The roasted cod with spinach is correct but plain, and the lamb osso buco tends to have spent too much time in the oven. The Sardinian "lasagne," a baked dish of thin bread layered with vegetables, pecorino and salami, is a soggy mess. The wonderful bollito misto — veal tongue! lamb belly! — is slightly undermined by a too-timid version of the candied-fruit condiment *mostarda*. Though to be fair, it's hard to find a truly great *mostarda* in the United States.

But Drago has always been ace with pasta, and his fresh *pappardelle* with pheasant and morels, his ricotta *cavatelli* with venison sauce, and *paccheri* with spot prawns are as glamorous as Fred and Ginger dancing on a penthouse terrace. The little oxtail-stuffed ravioli with celery root in a tart, rich broth have rarely been the source of complaints. A plate of fresh fettuccine with lobster and a cream sauce tinted pink with Basque *espelette* peppers is an essay in richness. The dense, luxuriously soft *agnolotti* in a kind of herbed demiglace are superb.

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