

Los Angeles Times

CALENDAR

MONDAY, DECEMBER 29, 2008 • LATIMES.COM/CALENDAR

THE GUIDE



Photographs by RICARDO DEARATANHA Los Angeles Times

DRAMATIC: The restaurant is crisp and airy, with tall windows that offer a scenic view of the Central Library.

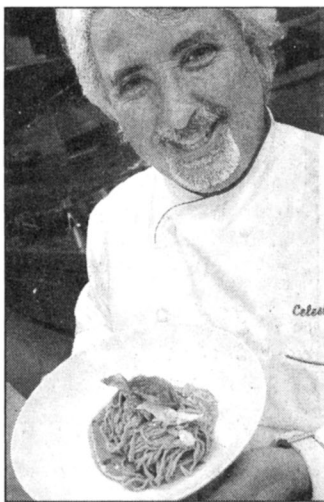
RESTAURANTS: EARLY BIRD

Where quality is at the core

Downtown L.A. has a haute new item on its menu as Drago Centro serves Italian dishes familiar and not-so.

S. IRENE VIRBILA
RESTAURANT CRITIC

The view from the new Drago Centro is fine. An expanse of floor-to-ceiling windows looks across Flower Street to the Central Library building and the adjacent garden. At dinner recently, Celestino Drago was at the bar, pouring Prosecco for friends and generally showing off the crown jewel in his Italian restaurant portfolio. The silver-haired, Sicilian-born chef is usually found at one of his Westside restaurants — Drago in Santa Monica or Il Pastaio and Enoteca Drago in Beverly Hills. But with this chic Italian newcomer, he's moving into the downtown L.A. scene.



Chef Celestino Drago is the power behind Drago, Il Pastaio and Enoteca Drago.

Drago Centro

Where: City National Plaza, 525 S. Flower St., L.A.

When: Lunch, 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Mon.-Fri.; dinner, 5:30-10 p.m. Mon.-Thu., 5:30-10:30 p.m. Fri.-Sat. Full bar. Valet parking.

Price: Dinner antipasti, \$9-\$18; salads, \$12-\$14; pasta and risotto, \$14-\$26; main courses, \$26-\$37; side dishes, \$9-\$14; desserts, \$9.

Contact: (213) 228-8998; www.dragocentro.com

Drago Centro, in fact, feels much more urban than his other restaurants. Black Murano glass chandeliers sprout from the ceiling. A glass wine tower divides the bar from the dining room, where the ceilings are vaulted and the white leather dining chairs are slip-covered in linen. Break out those Armani suits, gentlemen.

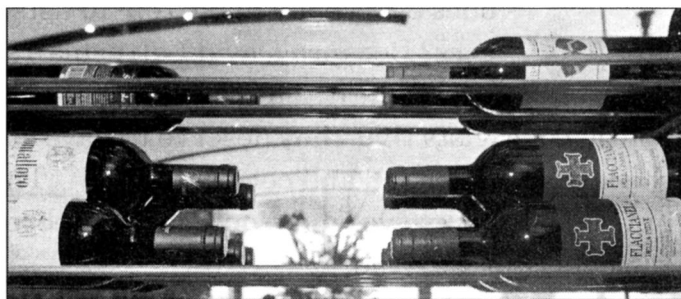
The menu from Drago and chef de cuisine Ian Gresik starts off with a long list of antipasti and *primi* (first courses). Venison carpaccio sings with a deft sherry vinaigrette and a sprinkling of walnuts. Bufala mozzarella arrives on toast with tomatoes. There's an ample *salumi* plate, sautéed mussels with cracked black pepper or a lovely salad of artichokes with Belgian endive, pistachios and an extra virgin olive oil *sa-bayon* too.

OK, cut to the pasta, the heart and soul of any Italian menu. Divided into fresh egg, hard durum wheat and stuffed pasta categories, the menu offers some tempting choices for pasta hounds. I couldn't resist ordering the wintry *pizzoccheri della valtellina*. That's buckwheat pasta with braised cabbage, potatoes, fontina cheese

and a touch of sage. That one dish should be enough to get anybody in the door. But there's also *paccheri* (large tube pasta) with spot prawns and *puttanesca* sauce, or oxtail ravioli with celery root. Bravo! None of these are the same old dishes you see at every Italian restaurant. Main courses, though, are more conventional. And dessert? Look to the sweet little ricotta doughnuts with pears and brown butter gelato.

With Latin-themed restaurants opening left and right, Drago Centro just may nicely fill the need for a smart contemporary Italian. Welcome to downtown Los Angeles, Mr. Drago.

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GREAT WALL: A glass wine tower divides the bar from the dining room. The ambience is chic and, well . . . urban.