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Hey, George Clooney... Forget Lake Como, Some of the Best Italian Food Is in... Santa Monica!

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Note to George Clooney: I know you have this beautiful home on Lake Como in Italy, and several of my friends have recently visited you there. But I have some exciting news for you. For the past 60 years I have traveled the length and breath of that country, eating my way through it many, many times. Some fabulous meals, often in unexpected places. (A monastery in the mountains, a farmhouse outside of Rome!) But the best Northern Italian meal I have had in many years was last night, in a Santa Monica restaurant.



There is a place on the Third Street Promenade at 231 Arizona called Locanda del Lago (Arizona is one block north of Santa Monica Blvd. and one block south of Wilshire, with valet parking (310) 451-3525) which roughly translates as... The Inn on the Lake. (A locanda usually has a few rooms upstairs, as opposed to a trattoria or ristorante, which doesn't. Though this one doesn't, either, as far as I know.) It has been there for almost twenty years, under the tutelage of a charming and somewhat reticent (for an Italian) handsome fellow named West Hooker-Poletti and a beautiful general manager named Megan Sheehy (yes, she is Irish but portrays the true Italian soul). "I studied electrical engineering and came to work here fourteen years ago to pay my tuition. When I graduated, I continued here until this day." Wow, what a smart and vociferous woman.



**West Hooker-Poletti opened the restaurant nearly twenty years ago.
Megan Sheehy has been general manager for fourteen years.**

I reviewed it about three years ago and gave it a nice thumbs-up, but lately I have been receiving word from some of my more astute readers that they are turning out some of the most delicious Northern Italian fare (from the Lombardy-Piedmont region) my sophisticated, well-traveled readers have ever experienced. So last night I took my ex, the lovely Annabelle, and her new husband Steve Shulman, for an exploratory dinner... since they are leaving for Lake Como at the end of September and I figured they could get some travel advice from West. I know the name does not fit; he laughingly says he is of German/American extraction, born in Milan and raised by his stepfather, Sergio Poletti, who ran several five-star CIGA hotels and opened in Milan the largest hotel at that time, so he grew up in the hospitality industry. When he first came to the States, he was Food and Beverage Manager at The Mayfair Regent in New York when the property hosted the acclaimed Le Cirque restaurant by Sirio Maccioni. West will be the father of a little girl comes November, his first child.

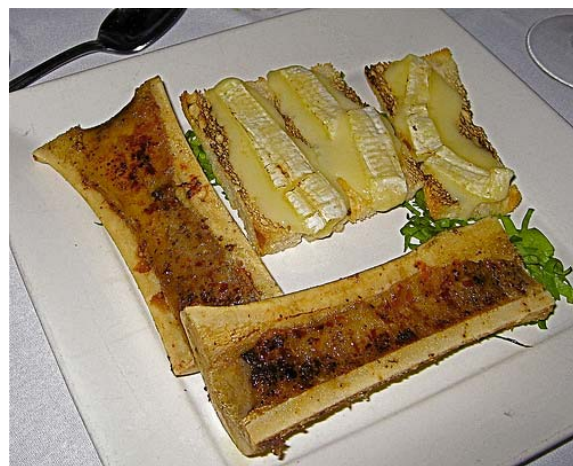
But the evening took an unexpected, welcome turn when the meal began. I learned that the new chef, Roberto Maggioni, had been born in Milan from where West had come. West eventually had moved to Bellagio, about an hour north of Milan and just a ferry ride from the five-star Villa D'Este where my friends were headed.

"About three years ago, we had the Sous Chef from that fabulous hotel doing a station in our kitchen for a few months, and when our chef left, the sous chef recommended I look into this chef with whom he had worked. I spoke with him over the phone while he was working at a fine-dining restaurant in Majorca, Spain where he had been cooking for four years... since he had always wanted to come to the U.S., we offered him the position. He arrived here with his girlfriend, and things have not been tranquil at Locanda del Lago since. He slowly revamped our menu into a paragon of unique Northern Italian specialties while keeping all of the traditional dishes for which we were known: ossobuco, spaghetti Bolognese, rainbow trout and the like. I asked West and Megan if we could have a meal of the chef's most celebrated specialties, and that is what produced our extraordinary dinner.



The brilliant 28-year old chef, Roberto Maggioni, revitalized the restaurant's menu.

The chef's opening salvo was relatively small, a few Italian breadsticks (\$6) around which was wrapped prosciutto from Parma; what I didn't realize until eating one was that he had dipped the breadstick into a "onnato" tuna-caper aioli before wrapping it, for a unique taste. Accompanying them was a plate of Weiser Farm Padron and Shishito peppers (\$8), with a garlic aioli. The Padron peppers are only available for two months a year, and I quickly realized that the chef was combining his Northern Italian sensibilities with produce from the Santa Monica Farmer's Market just down the street... a great combination. Next up was a plate of Burrata cheese (\$11) made locally by the Italian Gioia family from its age-old formula; the ultimate cream cheese, with basil foam and tomato gelato. Next to it was a plate of delicious spicy tuna tartare with a topping of savory avocado sorbetto, while on the same plate was orange-marinated swordfish ceviche, with homemade squid ink caviar (\$16). Yes, the chef had caught my attention... but it was the next dish which made me realize that I was in the presence of a rare talent: Veal cartilage (tendon) from a ranch in Texas, chopped into a salad of market cannellini beans and bell peppers, with a drizzling of extra-virgin oil! Offal was welcome here.



The veal tendon salad was what made me realize we were in for a unique meal. Roasted bone marrow is spooned atop the cheese-honey toast for a wonderful taste treat!

The opera was about to commence. Imagine a plate of split caramelized bone marrow bones beside crostini (toast) covered with Lombardy's Robiola cheese and truffle honey, waiting for the marrow to be extracted and placed atop it for eager consumption. (Except for Annabelle, who had not eaten anything yet.) The next dish was intriguing, but I could only eat one bite... an acquired salty taste. "Missoltin" sun-dried Agone (\$10), an anchovy-like fish of Lake Como, only available there in April, then air-dried and processed, imported by West. Served with buckwheat polenta and red wine vinegar.



One of my favorite dishes was the beet risotto with gorgonzola cheese, a recipe from the chef's grandmother.

My favorite dish of the night? The chef's mother's recipe of a Gorgonzola "Dolcelatte" and market beet risotto (\$14/19) topped with dehydrated farmer's market beets. Just an incredible flavor; Steve and I scarfed it up. Annie finally got something she could dig into: Half-moon ravioli (\$19/26) with Tuscan Pecorino cheese and sage butter, with a profusion of shaved black truffles from Molise (in the boot of Italy). The most theatrical dish of the amazing evening? Salt-baked Wild Chilean Sea Bass (\$34), (MSC certified, environmentally sustainable). Which Megan cracked open to exhibit the meltingly-soft perfectly cooked fish, served with pickled vegetables and a salsa verde.

The wild Chilean sea bass is roasted in a coating of kosher salt...



**Megan cracks open the salt to reveal the aromatic, delicious fish filets
....the fish is served to an eager table of diners!**

We protested that we had to be finished, but a small glass of lemon sorbet and Hendrick's gin revived our flagging appetites....at least for one final entrée. A Niman Ranch all-natural Filet Mignon (\$32), served with market figs, Taleggio crispy market Weiser potato, and Bermuda onion confit.



The final entree was a Niman Ranch filet steak with a potato galette and onions.

I won't even go into the many desserts which ended the astonishing meal; needless to say we tasted and almost finished all of the remarkable fruit sorbets and chocolate cake. They enjoy a full bar and Megan has evolved a fascinating wine list of boutique and unusual vintages at very reasonable prices. Our smart waitress, Kristen, noted that all the pastas, foccaccia bread, desserts and gelato are made fresh daily.



All of the delicious desserts are made in house..the sorbets with fresh farmer's market fruits.

At which point West brought out the 28-year old chef, who had really knocked my socks off (not easy to do these days) with his imaginative and taste ful dishes. Don't let the location fool you - this is no ordinary restaurant. I immediately made plans to return here in early September with some food friends to show them the wonders of this Italian kitchen. Wanna join me?