

DINING REVIEW BY JENNY TURKNETT

Heart, genius make Boccalupo a worthy suitor

Posted: 12:00 a.m. Thursday, Sept. 12, 2013

BY JENNY TURKNETT - FOR THE AJC

I date restaurants. On rare occasions, it's love at first bite. More often it's an exploration, more of a cautious get-to-know-you dance. Some end badly, but most frequently we part as friends. And sometimes while I have an early gut feeling about the chemistry between us, it takes a few dates before it blossoms into something more.

That's how it was with Boccalupo, Atlanta's new Italian-American pasta-making heavyweight. It wasn't until the third date that I knew. That was when the stars aligned, the pieces jimmied into place and I knew this little restaurant-that-could nestled in a quiet corner of Inman Park had the makings of Atlanta's next great restaurant.



Besides its wonderful pasta dishes, Boccalupo has a talent with vegetables, such as Roman fried cauliflower, with mint, capers and Meyer ... [Read More](#)

Chef/owner Bruce Logue, an Atlanta native, introduced our town to his brand of Italian-American cooking at La Pietra Cucina. Before that, he honed his skills at Mario Batali's Babbo in New York City and spent eight months cooking his way through Italy with the country's top chefs.

Logue stays true to authentic Italian cooking by taking advantage of local and regional ingredients. While he imports some products, Logue attempts to locate domestic ingredients with similar flavor profiles to their Italian counterparts. Olive oil and tomatoes come from California, prosciutto from Iowa, and Parmigiano-Reggiano-style cheese from Wisconsin. Other items like ricotta, burrata, mozzarella and mortadella are all made in-house at Boccalupo.

While training and sourcing contribute to Logue's success and reputation as prince of pasta, his cooking resonates on a deeper level than can be reached by technical skill and ingredients alone. This chef cooks with an honesty like few others. You'll taste it in the soul-settling depths of his dishes.



One of Boccalupo's superstar dishes is the buttery 20-yolk tagliatelle with wild mushrooms and Tuscan kale kimchee. BECKY STEIN /SPECIAL

Logue found a space for Boccalupo to match his humble but confident approach. He chose the Inman Park home that once housed Ria Pell's restaurant Sauced because he said it "had the right bones" and a "good vibe," making him feel almost as though he were in the Pacific Northwest.

Boccalupo's smart but simple decor sets the tone for the cheffy neighborhood spot Logue hoped to create – a neutral backdrop for the edible art coming out of the kitchen.

In keeping with the neighborly feel, Logue crafted a relaxed and value-friendly dining experience. Servers are easygoing but professional. Entrees top out at \$19 a plate. The wine list featuring many Italian bottles offers a number of selections in the \$26-\$42 range.

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Boccalupo takes its name from an Italian expression for luck equivalent to “break a leg.” Logue says it signifies “everything that happened to get where we are,” including developing a

loyal customer base. Some of those patrons followed Logue from La Pietra Cucina and still find their favorite dishes on the Boccalupo menu.

The black squid ink spaghetti (\$19) reappears in all its glory with a melange of spicy calabrese sausage crumbles, shrimp and angled scallion slices. But Logue improved on the original with the black spaghetti ramen-style dish served one night on the four-course pasta tasting menu (\$40).

The firm spaghetti swirls in a heady pork-and-beef broth with red-skinned boiled peanuts, bits of braised pork belly and tiny buds of cauliflower. Who puts boiled peanuts in ramen? Bruce Logue, of course, and it's genius. It comes together like an earthy ham-hock-flavored potlikker, just without the collards.

I'd drive across town for that dish alone, but you really can't go wrong with any of the pastas. The buttery 20-yolk tagliatelle (\$19) also attains superstar status, its rich strips mingled with a flavor-forward combination of Tuscan kale kimchee and a flurry of mushrooms. I'm also fond of the subtler bucatini (\$15) with gentle notes of smoked bacon in the pomodoro sauce and the dish of slick wide-pappardelle noodles in a very meaty bolognese (\$14).

Lest you think Boccalupo only prepares beautiful pastas with artfully nuanced sauces, let's consider the vegetable cookery. If you've ever had an aversion to the frequently maligned cauliflower or broccoli, re-educate your palate here. I've never had a better bite of cauliflower than Boccalupo's Roman fried version (\$7), so salty, lemony and surprisingly caramel-y. Ditto that for the browned roasted broccoli mixed into cream-coated Strano pasta spirals (\$14).

The menu also features a section of "not noodles" (and a selection of rice noodles for the gluten-free diners). These include skewers of charred beef belly threaded with artichoke hearts and spicy peppadews (\$17). And as the days cool, I could lose myself in a deep bowl of the hot risotto (\$19) made with Anson Mills rice middlins, lump crab and house-smoked tomatoes. Logue contrasts the hot grits-like mixture with a cool rim of Vidalia onion brodo, adding interest to sustain your attention.

When it comes to dessert, the warm and sugary zeppoles (\$7) will occupy your taste buds, as will the light and creamy pecan semifreddo adorned with clumps of crackling pecan brittle. The semifreddo came at the conclusion of the tasting menu one night. Let's hope it makes repeat appearances.

On my first and second dates with Boccalupo, I was courted by the cozy and comfortable space and a frolic through the menu. On the third, it was the pasta tasting that stole my heart. Now I'm ready to move in – to the neighborhood, that is.

BOCCALUPO

Overall rating: 4 of 5 stars

Food: Italian-American

Service: very professional but easygoing

Best dishes: black spaghetti ramen, 20-yolk tagliatelle, bucatini, pappardelle

Vegetarian selections: assorted pasta dishes, salads

Price range: \$\$-\$\$\$

Credit cards: all major credit cards

Hours: 5:30-10 p.m. Mondays-Thursdays, 5:30-11 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays

Children: fine

Parking: dedicated lot

Reservations: yes

Wheelchair access: yes

Smoking: no

Noise level: moderate to high

Patio: yes

Takeout: yes

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Website: www.boccalupoatl.com