

DINING REVIEW

Where antipasti take center stage

TIGELLERIA
REDEFINES
ITALIAN DININGBy Aleta Watson
Mercury News

Tigella (tea-jella) n. — Small flat bread baked between heated tiles; traditional in the Emilia-Romagna region of Italy.

It's only natural that South Bay diners would think they know Italian food. Not only is there a long history of Italian fishermen, bakers and restaurateurs in the Bay Area, but a new generation of ambitious chefs have introduced us to the joys of the country's artisanal ingredients, from aged balsamic vinegar to hand-crafted *salumi* and creamy-centered burrata cheese.

Then along comes a restaurant like Tigelleria Ristorante in downtown Campbell and we get a whole new perspective on the Italian way of eating. Antipasti, usually little more than the prelude to a meal, are the main event at this charming little spot. Owners Mirco Caramori and Elisabetta Benetollo have organized their menu around the little flat breads they grew up with near Mantua.

Hot from the baking stone, the fairly bland *tigelle* are served with platters of flavorful cured meat, cheese or grilled vegetables for a convivial meal focused as much on the company as the food. Split the puffy little breads in half, tuck in a bit of meat, a chunk of cheese and perhaps some hummus, olive tapanade or fava and mint spread and you're on your way to an enjoyable evening.

Opened in December

Caramori and Benetollo, husband and wife, opened Tigelleria in December in a former florist's shop that they remodeled from the ground up. It's an inviting rust-colored stucco building with a tile roof, wood trellises over the windows and cobalt blue pots planted with bougainvillea.

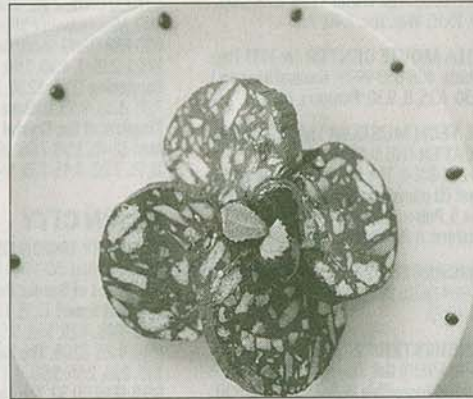
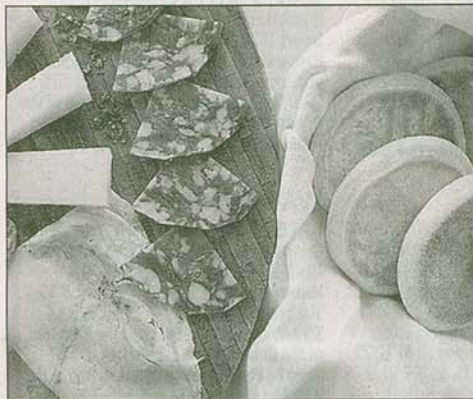
Inside, the 40-seat dining room gets points for style with its tile floors, halogen lights and dramatic red glass Artemide chandelier hanging below a reproduction of a 16th-century ceiling fresco. Bare wood tables and rush-seated chairs were made to order in the style of a typical *osteria*. Fellini films flicker on the wall behind the bar.

"We wanted to be 100 percent Italian," says Benetollo, who runs the front of the house and makes the desserts. "We wanted to serve real Italian food. We want to teach people to try the real



NHAT V. MEYER — MERCURY NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS

The dining room at Tigelleria Ristorante, above, seats 40. The restaurant opened in Campbell in December. Below left, the "Etrusco" platter with meats and cheeses. Below right, sweet chocolate salame (\$6), with dark chocolate and almond cookie crumbs.



Italian experience."

The wine list is dominated by Italian wines, too. Among them is a very nice 2005 Chianti classico from Castello d'Albola (\$9/glass) and a pleasant, dry 2006 Bardolino Chiaretto rosé from Cavalcina in the Veneto region (\$8/glass).

Benetollo's cheerful personality makes the dining room a warm and friendly place. She obviously enjoys stopping by tables to chat with diners about Tigelleria's concept or explain dishes. Service is attentive.

Although the menu includes the usual soups, salads and some exceptional pastas, the emphasis is on the bread paired with imported meats hand-sliced by Caramori, a software engineer turned res-

taurateur.

Beautiful, tissue-thin layers of prosciutto di Parma, speck ham, roast pork, mortadella, air-dried beef or salami are arranged in varying combinations (\$14-\$18) on large, round cutting boards. Some combos may include pecorino, buffalo mozzarella, Gorgonzola, provolone or fontina cheese.

Alternatively, there are platters devoted to grilled vegetables (\$16) or cheese (\$12-\$20).

The meats are excellent, the speck smoky and rich, the prosciutto sweet with a melting texture. I particularly liked the porchetta, roast pork with a whisper of fennel, on the "Etrusco" platter, called a palette on the menu (\$15). Sharp pecorino Romano cheese was a nice counter-

point.

Still, so much unrelieved meat and cheese quickly becomes tiresome. My companion and I fared better on the first visit when we ordered the grilled vegetables, including meaty porcini mushrooms, to pair with the basic salumi palette (\$18). It was way too much food for two, but the vegetables brought balance to the meal.

Salads are generous and made with very fresh greens. Soggy peas undermined an otherwise pleasant spinach salad with pesto (\$12), however. The same peas were tough and unappealing in the delicate broth of the Stracciatella alla Romana (\$7), an egg drop soup.

Finocchio, a large tangle of shaved fennel, Parmesan and

Tigelleria Ristorante

75 E. Campbell Ave., at Fourth Street,
Campbell. (408) 884-3808,
www.tigelleria.com.

★★★

The Dish: Dining Italian style is redefined at this stylish little restaurant that turns the menu upside-down with antipasti served as the main course. The focus is on little flat breads served with cured meats, cheeses and Italian wines.

Price range: Lunch \$9-\$14. Dinner appetizers \$7-\$10, entrees \$12-\$45. Corkage fee: \$25.

Details: Full bar.

Pluses: Outstanding pappardelle with Bolognese sauce and airy tiramisu

Minuses: Soggy peas in spinach salad, medicinal liqueur in zuppa Inglese.

Hours: Lunch noon-2 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays. Dinner 5:30-10 p.m. Tuesdays-Thursdays and Sundays, till 11 Fridays and Saturdays.

Restaurants are rated on a four-star scale: four stars (excellent), three stars (good), two stars (fair) and one star (poor). Reviews are conducted anonymously. The Mercury News pays for all meals.

pine nuts drizzled with 15-year-old balsamic vinegar (\$11) was too much of a good thing: A smaller serving would have piqued the appetite rather than overwhelm it.

Memorable pastas

By far, the most memorable dishes we ate at Tigelleria were pastas. The mellow, well-seasoned Bolognese sauce on tender ribbons of pappardelle (\$14) was pure comfort food. Bucatini all'Amatriciana (\$13) was chewy and wonderful with a bright and chile-spiked sauce cloaking long strands of tubular pasta similar to thick spaghetti — but better.

Desserts are Benetollo's specialty, and her tiramisu (\$6) is a classic, light and airy with a soft undercurrent of Marsala. The sweet chocolate salame (\$6), a fudgy roll of dark chocolate and crunchy almond cookie crumbs, is quite good, and the meringue cake (\$7) of meringue blended with zabaglione, whipped cream and white and dark chocolate is irresistible.

Yet I just couldn't get my taste buds past the medicinal flavor of the Alchermes liqueur floating atop the zuppa Inglese (\$7), a sort of trifle. Like many Italians, Benetollo loves the heavily spiced liqueur. Others may wish it weren't quite so authentic.

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