

TASTE MAKER

Chef's Palette

Five-star chef Henry Gonzalez creates culinary works of art at Spaggi's, his fine-dining Italian restaurant in Upland. *Written by David Cohen. Photographed by Trina Gonzalez.*

It's been a while since I've visited Spaggi's, Chef Henry Gonzalez's ode to upscale Italian dining in a beautifully decorated space with artwork worthy of a museum exhibition. Chef Henry recently received a 5-star rating from the Southern California Restaurant Writers, as well as being named their Chef of the Year.

To what does Henry attribute his success? He only buys line-caught, sustainable fish and plump jumbo shrimp. All meats are prime and dry aged, purchased from the Meyer Beef Company. Mushrooms are all of wild origin—no button varieties—and the vegetables are organic and locally grown. The salt used for flavoring is exclusively Himalayan sea salt, and raw sugar and stevia are the only sweetening agents.

Chef Henry is the consummate culinary perfectionist, yet always finds time with his wife, Ana, the general manager, to give back to the community in multiple ways, including Feed the People programs twice a month in San Bernardino. For these reasons, customer loyalty is at an all-time high, a result of Henry and Ana's passion, compassion and skill.

For Henry, owning and running Spaggi's is the culmination of a lifetime of culinary experience. At age 9 he washed dishes in the restaurant where his father worked as a chef. In order to do so, he had to go to church and keep his grades up, but that was no problem. He loved being in the kitchen.

At 16 he went to work at Rosa's Restaurant in Baldwin Park and eventually moved to its Ontario location. He attended the Los Angeles Culinary Institute and later gained experience at other restaurants, including Melvyn's in Palm Springs where diners included celebrities like Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin.

He eventually landed at Wolfe's Market kitchen in Claremont where he discovered how his talent as a chef could be used in service to others. In 2002, he became co-owner of Spaggi's, and in 2009 assumed full ownership.

While Italian fare is Henry's forte, the summer season brings more salads and fish to the menu.

Some of his newer offerings include the caprese salad with sliced heirloom tomatoes topped with discs of fresh mozzarella, assorted chopped olives, including the bright green castelvetro (one of my favorites), extra virgin olive oil and a fresh basil garnish.

The burrata salad with four grilled bread slices is outstanding. The white, creamy burrata cheese is infused with olive and truffle oil and blended with diced sun-dried tomatoes and olive pieces, none of which was particularly salty. Sprigs of fresh rosemary add to the visual display. Spread the blend onto the toasted bread slices, close your eyes and think of Tuscany.

Henry also does bruschetta—bread topped with assorted ingredients; in this case, chopped Swedish cucumbers and red and yellow cherry tomatoes, along with basil that has been tossed with extra virgin olive oil and white balsamic vinegar.

Another starter was an outstanding roasted and poached red and golden beet salad, which consisted of generous amounts of beet wedges, goat cheese balls, red quinoa and an arugula salad—beautifully conceived in every aspect.

The final summer garden item was watermelon salad: short finger-like projections of watermelon, beautifully ripe strawberries, and sliced watermelon radish (white exterior and red interior), marinated in rice vinegar and accompanied by sliced almonds, pine nuts, goat cheese and arugula, all working together to create a refreshing array of flavors.

Moving on to the entrees, Australian barramundi, a firm white-fleshed fish, is served atop saffron risotto after having been broiled with garlic and brushed with olive oil. The pan is deglazed with white wine and lemon juice and a bit of butter. A succulent jumbo shrimp accompanies the fish as

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well as rainbow organic carrots of various colors, broccoli and snap peas.

The show stopper was the 18-ounce 30-day dry aged prime ribeye steak which is broiled after searing in an 1,800°F infrared Montague steakhouse broiler for one to two minutes a side. It results in a perfect charred medium rare doneness, one of the most succulent, flavorful and aromatic pieces of meat I've ever encountered. It's cut in-house and marries perfectly with a Famiglia Pasqua Amarone from Valpolicella. Also outstanding were the short rib-filled ravioli bathed in an osso buco reduction sauce with fresh spring peas.

In addition to the seasonal fare, don't miss the signature dishes at Spaggi's. The osso buco consists of a braised veal shank with carrots, celery, onions,

Opposite page: Chef Henry Gonzalez recently earned a 5-star rating from Southern California Restaurant Writers.