

MAMI

FOOD DRINK | REVIEW



ITALIAN LESSONS Above, clockwise from top left: The dining room at MC Kitchen and its view of the Design District; mozzarella caprese pizza with spinach, pesto and tomatoes; chef and co-owner Dena Marino. Below right: Artichoke hearts bruschetta with poached farm egg, shaved truffles and Parmesan *fonduta*

Marino Magic

At MC Kitchen, chef Dena Marino goes for farm-to-table ingenuity—Italian style!

| By Jen Karetnick | Photography by Michael Pisarri |

Long before it was fashionable, my mother kept a well-stocked refrigerator overfilled with farm-to-table goods so we could whip up gourmet creations on a whim. Still, like all families, we occasionally ran out of basics. Then it was my father who became the master of invention. No milk? No worries. A coffee addict, he would drop a couple of spoonfuls of vanilla ice cream into his morning cup. I admit this seemed disturbing at the time. But now I know: what is stirring ice cream into your java but the reverse of an *affogato*, the Italian sweet that calls for pouring espresso over a scoop of gelato?

My mother's appreciation for high-quality ingredients cooked to order and my father's lifelong devotion to coffee are only two of the purported reasons I'll be taking them to MC Kitchen, where fresh, seasonal fare is a priority and *affogato* is a must-have dessert. The other motivation is more self-serving: These parental units of mine are notorious restaurant

assassins who wreak havoc on my favorite places. But I'm pretty sure that MC Kitchen, coolly chic and utterly composed, is made of epicurean Kevlar. The staff can withstand the double barrels of critical scrutiny, and still be standing and serving sumptuous fare long after they holster the most challenging of diner demands.

MC Kitchen was opened by chef Dena Marino, a Colorado transplant who trained under renowned chef-entrepreneur Michael Chiarello at Tra Vigne and her business partner Brandy Coletta, in the Design District in December. It took over the spot formerly occupied by Fratelli Lyon, a well-liked establishment that offered contemporary Italian fare and high design. After a six-month renovation, MC Kitchen has improved on the stylish standards set by the erstwhile Fratelli Lyon by widening the space, opening up the kitchen to view and creating a bar-in-the-round that extends into the lobby.

It is on these latte-hued, leather barstools that patrons wait for their reservations, sipping whimsically named cocktails such as Scarborough Fair and Tommy Pickles, all of which require definition to some extent. For example, the Scarborough is CONTINUED...

MC Kitchen

4141 Second Ave., Miami
305.456.9948
mckitchenmiami.com

Lunch and dinner daily:
11AM-11PM

Antipasti: \$10-\$24
Soups and salads: \$8-\$14
Pasta: \$14-\$26
Fish and meats: \$29-\$46
Desserts: \$8-\$21

The Crowd

The market-fresh fare approach at MC Kitchen is attracting lots of Europeans, whether native or ex-pats, all who seem to be wearing an entire department store full of scents. If your dining neighbor's cologne overpowers the bouquet of your wine, don't say we didn't warn you.

The Water

Do drink the water. MC Kitchen serves unlimited, ultrapurified still or sparkling Vero water for \$2 per guest. Keep in mind that 50 percent of those earnings are donated to Water.org and its efforts to keep oceans clean.

The Future

Mercato, a grocery shop next to the dining room featuring Marino's proprietary blend of olive oil, homemade cheeses (including the house-pulled mozzarella), freshly baked breads and meal replacements, will open later this year.



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If you're a fan of Italian-American cuisine that takes its cues from the actual boot, where fare is created from the available agriculture and aquaculture, then Dena Marino's menu at MC Kitchen will be a thrill.

...CONTINUED flavored with exactly what you might expect (sing it with us): parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme. These herbs are added to Charbay Meyer Lemon Farricello Vodka and Sourwood-Meyer Lemon Sap. (Charbay is a wine and spirits company based in California; *farricello* is broken spelt, which can be used to make anything from pasta to spirits and is common to the Appenines; and sourwood is a tree, also known as sorrel, from which the sap can be distilled into a syrup.) And the Tommy Pickles, so-called for both the *Rugrats* character and for the Brooklyn Brine Co. pickles that doctor the Doghead 60 Minute IPA beer in it, also features bell peppers and onions, resulting in a brew that reminds one vaguely of a western omelet without the ham and egg. Got all that? Don't worry if you don't, because the mixologists here will gladly give you a rundown, especially about the 20 Dogfish Head Ale draft taps that constantly change. Apparently, this Delaware brewery's success is our gain, so craft beer enthusiasts, rejoice.

But that's not all who should be celebrating. If you're a fan of Italian-American cuisine that takes its



MANGIA! MANGIA!
From top: MC's open kitchen lends an energetic vibe to the restaurant's dining room; Heritage Breed chicken with asparagus, wild mushrooms and over-easy farm egg

cues from the actual boot, where fare is created from the available agriculture and aquaculture, then Dena Marino's menu will be a thrill.

Feel free to start with those thrills with chills. Omnipresent burrata is stuffed not with curd but with whipped, roasted squash that oozes out over leaves of peppery arugula so young and tender they're practically infantile, cast-aside clichés of mozzarella-tomato salads. Like any well-rounded Miami menu, MC's offers a raw fish option; in this case, delicately sliced halibut crudo garnished with hearts of palm, celery and shaved artichoke, all heightened with a drizzle of lemon oil and a touch of Maldon sea salt.

As refreshing as these dishes can be, I'm all for the hot stuff. Cooked starters range from a tangle of crisp fried calamari, a special one evening, to a slew of Prince Edward Island mussels in a broth made with yet more Dogfish beer, this time the potent Hellhound on My Ale style. The most successful dish, though—if you define success by how many times I've ordered it—also subverts a popular Italian presentation. Using the idea of bruschetta, Marino tops crusty bread with supple artichoke hearts, a barely poached farm egg, *fonduta* (a blend of cheeses including semisoft fontina, heavy cream and egg yolks) and shaved black truffles. The textures of egg white and artichoke heart are wonderfully complementary, and after you pierce the yolk, the *fonduta* becomes even richer. This is the point where you ask your server for extra bread, which he or she will happily deliver. They know how good it is.

Following up the *fonduta* with some of the more succulent but filling pastas may be overkill. But who cares, really, when confronted with the slightly sweet roasted pear and cheese *fiocchi*, frilled pouches that include four cheeses of varying ages and strengths, from fresh ricotta to pungent *talleggio*, and are covered with white truffle cream? The same can be said for the *bucatini alla carbonara*, which is stirred up with a farm egg cooked to only 63 degrees, black pepper, creamy Parmesan sauce and, as a twist on your average pancetta or domestic bacon, powder formulated from cooked *guanciale* (cured meat from pig's jowls).

Cleaner and lighter ingredients and flavors also abound. The pumpkin tortelloni covered with a ragu of braised Florida rabbit, cabbage and balsamic vinegar certainly doesn't weigh down the palate. It's impossible to go awry with fish, either, whether you opt for the special of the day—Marino riffs on whatever's back door-fresh, (frequently mahimahi)—or a menu staple, such as the quick-braised Florida grouper with *calabrese* sausage, broccoli rabe and a New England clam sauce that is less bisque-y and more broth-y than you might suppose from its title.

And although I'm sure there are more interesting desserts, each time I've dined at MC Kitchen, I've been drawn to the simplicity of the *affogatto*. Maybe it's my mother in me that causes me to consume so much of this artisanal fare that I can't conceive of downing anything else, or my father's love of the bean, passed down through the generations. Whatever the reason, I'll take it, and them, to Dena Marino—at least, that is, next time we're all in the same town. **M**