



Stern Eats: A Food and Dining Review with Uncompromising Taste

By Arthur J. Stern
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ABBOCCATO, Midtown Manhattan



My work recently took me to Midtown Manhattan, where I had dinner in a fantastic Italian restaurant, Abboccato. Surrounded by New York City landmarks, including Central Park, Trump Tower, Rockefeller Center, Times Square and the Theater District, this Midtown restaurant stands up to its world famous surroundings. The food, atmosphere and service are all top notch.

As many NYC eateries do, when the weather is nice Abboccato invites the outside in, with its wall of floor-to-ceiling windows open to the street, bringing the life of the city inside and the charm of the restaurant out. I, however, dined in the main dining room, which had a feeling that I can only describe as very cool, comfortable and classy, with a cozy lounge feel to it.

Our meal began with a round of cocktails. I had very nice version of the summery classic Mojito, and my dining companion enjoyed a refreshing Grapefruit Martini. We sipped our drinks while we acquainted ourselves with the menu. As we navigated this comprehensive book, I was impressed by the proficiency of our waiter, who was extremely well versed with the menu. Many of the items being classically Italian, he was intimately familiar with every dish, every ingredient, and every preparation and was able to guide us along like a pro. We took many of our waiter's recommendations and were happy to do so.

The meal began with two selections from the Chicotti section of the menu, which were described to us as small portions, about one third the size of an appetizer. The Fritti (\$8), Polenta Coated and Crispy Fried Seafood, with Lemon Aioli was a nice start. The shrimp, calamari and chunks of salmon were nicely cooked, crispy and not too oily, as I often find fried seafood to be. The lemon aioli dipping sauce was an incredible compliment to the seafood - the perfect light and creamy sauce, which could go well with almost anything. The Capesante (\$12), Seared Day Boat Scallops, with White Polenta Cake and Truffle Sauce was another good start. The three large scallops were perfectly cooked, and paired nicely with the truffle sauce. The polenta cake did not, in my opinion, bring anything extra to the dish, but was also nicely done, light and fresh.

The Antipasti course raised the bar. I thoroughly enjoyed the Grilled Octopus (\$15), with Warm Tuscan Bean Salad and Herb Vinaigrette. I was looking forward to this dish, ever since I researched the menu on the internet days before my visit, and the dish certainly did not disappoint me. I was absolutely satisfied. The octopus was perfectly cooked. With a light char on the outside, the meat was tender and almost had a sweetness to it. The fresh bed of beans and the puree beneath and the herb vinaigrette were nicely paired with the star of the plate. I also sampled the Burrata (\$16), served with Arugula and Red Onion and Parmasotto, with a Sun Dried Tomato Creamy Sherry Vinaigrette. Burrata is made from mozzarella and cream. The outer shell is that of a firm mozzarella and the inside is creamy, rich and buttery. This dish was served as a "bowl" of burrata, filled with the incredibly creamy center. It was placed over a serving of arugula, and fine red onion, all piled atop a generous thick slice of breaded and fried Parmasotto, a type of Italian cured ham. The Burrata was insanely delicious and creamy and everything underneath was a perfect match, from the fresh greens to the dressing to the ham. Both Antipasti were perfect dishes in my book.

Our waiter sold us on an Intermezzo course of two types of Ravioli (\$23). The first was Wild Greens and Ricotta Ravioli, dressed with Hazelnut Cream and Aged Balsamic, and the second was Casunziei, Beet and Gorgonzola filled half-moon Ravioli, with Butter and Poppy Seeds. The Wild Greens ravioli were the star of this course. The earthiness of the greens and the creamy ricotta were absolutely heaven-in-pasta when paired with the hazelnut cream and thick, sweet and tangy balsamic. The sweet beet-filled Casunziei on its own would have been nice. It was just overshadowed by its awesome counterpart.

The next and main course was as impressive as the previous three. The Abbacchio (\$32) Braised Baby Lamb Shank, Sweet Potato Puree with Mascarpone was as delicious and fork-tender as the best Osso Bucco that I have ever had. It was further complimented by the super sweet and creamy sweet potato puree, which could have been its own special course or dessert, a perfect pair with any hearty dish. The fish of the day was deep ocean perch, or what we commonly call Rock Fish (\$32) with a mixture of Sweet Peas, Fava Beans, Ramps, Bacon and an accent of Mint Aioli. The fillets of rock fish were nicely seared with a fine crust, and the flesh was light and flakey. The bed of greens and beans were a good base for the fish. The mint aioli was refreshing, but flavor-wise, seemed a bit out of place. I would have opted for a side of that amazing lemon aioli.

After a short breather, it was onto Dolci, or Dessert. The Chocolate House Cake (\$9) with Mascarpone was wonderful. The cake, served as a beautiful dome coated with a shiny chocolate ganache, was rich and chocolaty. The side serving of mascarpone was a light and creamy cloud of heaven. The Sorbetti and Gelati (\$9) was a sampling of three frozen treats: blueberry sorbet and sour cream and caramel gelatis. I listed them here in the order in which I ate them and in increasing order of greatness. The blueberry sorbet was what I was looking for; it was cool, crisp and refreshing. The sour cream gelati was wonderfully creamy and smooth. The caramel gelati blew the other two away - a powerful blast of rich caramel that knocked my socks off.

To cap off the meal, I tried a Digitiviti Tasting (\$13) a choice of any three of 13 after dinner drinks meant to aid digestion. The selections range from a potent concoction made from unripened walnuts to a more traditional Crème de Framboise, a raspberry liquor with a brandy base. I tried some of the more obscure drinks including the walnut and artichoke derived varieties, which were not my cup of tea, but were an authentic Italian experience.

Service throughout the meal was very good - among the best I've experienced. Waiters and supporting staff were attentive and never forgot a thing, and refreshed silverware with each course. They are also fully prepared to explain anything on the menu in language that is understandable to the most unadventurous eater.

The wine and drink menu matched the caliber of the service and food, with a selection that suited varying ranges of taste and budget.

Overall, my experience at Abboccato was Very Good and I am rating this restaurant as such. The atmosphere was cool and relaxing. The food was authentically Italian and was wonderful. Everything was very good, especially the antipasti course, which I found to be Perfect (a word that I do not use lightly). Service was well above par, and from the praises given to our waiter from other parties in the room, that seemed to be the consensus. Prices are on the higher side (my five course meal for two with drinks came to \$211 plus tax and tip), for some dishes, but are worth the money for a night on the town. Dishes are generous in size. We left absolutely stuffed, with leftovers for lunch.

Abboccato is a Very Good restaurant, which is located in the center of Midtown Manhattan, within walking distance from Times Square and the theater district. Next time you find yourself in NYC, I would recommend Abboccato for a wonderful Italian meal.

It is time for me to move onward, in my search for the perfect meal. Check back soon and join me again, as Stern Eats.

Abboccato is located at 136 West 55th Street, New York, New York and is attached to the Blakely Hotel, of K Hotels (www.k-hotels.com). You can reach Abboccato at (212) 265-400, or you can visit them on the internet at www.abboccato.com

Arthur J. Stern is a food and dining columnist for The Alternative Press. Arthur has eaten his way around the globe, from Japan, Taiwan and China, to Egypt, Italy and France, to nearly every region of the United States, including Alaska and Hawaii. Arthur's true love is food and everything about it. His friends and family know him as the "food guy", and to those who are close to him, Arthur is the resource on where and what to eat. Arthur's life is a never ending pursuit for the perfect meal. In Stern Eats, Arthur enjoys sharing with you his journey through New Jersey's culinary world. He welcomes hearing from you at SternEats@TheAlternativePress.com.

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