

platter

food finds, restaurant news and dining trends | By GRANT BUTLER

WHEN IN ROME — Some restaurants open with a big bang. They hire publicists, send out barrages of press releases and get Portland's rabid food aficionados into full froth before they ever even open their doors. From Day 1 — or at least until they hit a run of bad food or service — these restaurants are hits.

Other restaurants arrive with nary a peep, like **Ristorante Roma** (622 S.W. 12th Ave.; 503-241-2692), which opened quietly late last month in a completely redone downtown storefront.

"Sometimes it's busy at lunch, but some nights it's slow," says owner Alexandru Petrache, who relocated to Portland last year after cooking for 17 years in Rome, most recently at a five-star hotel.

Petrache, who runs the restaurant with his wife, Norgen, decided to move to Portland after vacationing here in 2004, when he noticed how many Italian restaurants were thriving here. "I felt this was a great town for Italian food," he said. "And I loved the people."

The mood is casual, with large photos of such Italian landmarks as the Trevi Fountain adorning the gold-colored walls. At night the dining room is brightly lit, as if it's a reaction against the current chic in so many Portland restaurants where the lighting is so low you can't read the menu.

Ristorante Roma is a trattoria-style place, so the emphasis is on low-priced everyday fare, like a generous portion of pillow-light gnocchi in a smoked salmon cream sauce, or bucatini tossed with Italian bacon and tomatoes. Meat and fish entrees include such dishes as chicken scaloppine, and tilapia and olives in white-wine sauce. None of it will set you back much. With one exception, all the pastas are priced under \$9 and the entrees top out at \$18, though most are priced far lower. With a couple of glasses of wine, a couple could have a meal for well under \$40.

Many of the ingredients in Ristorante Roma's dishes are imported directly from Italy, including the pastas, prosciutto and salami. "I'm trying to give the customers an authentic Italian

menu," Petrache said.

AROUND TOWN — **Wild Abandon** owner Michael Cox is a man with a big heart. Each year he celebrates his restaurant's anniversary by throwing a benefit for Our House of Portland, a care facility for people with AIDS. This year's celebration — it's the restaurant's 11th anniversary — is next Thursday. Cox will donate half of the night's proceeds to OHOP. Call for reservations. (2411 S.E. Belmont St.; 503-232-4458) ... In other anniversary news: **Pambiche** (2811 N.E. Glisan St.; 503-233-0511) marks its sixth birthday by adding weekend breakfasts later this spring and by extending happy-hour specials into late night on Fridays and Saturdays beginning Feb. 17. ... **Bar 71** is currently closed, with plans to reopen as a British-themed pub on — of all days — St. Patrick's.

GOT A RESTAURANT TIP? Send to A&E Platter, The Oregonian, 1320 S.W. Broadway, Portland OR 97201. Or fax: 503-294-5029.



MOTOYA NAKAMURA/THE OREGONIAN

Ristorante Roma owner Alexandru Petrache spent 17 years cooking in Rome, but wanted to open his own restaurant in Portland because he fell in love with the place and its people.

Ristorante Roma

ANGEL FACE: A new bar in Northeast Portland is now open, tipsters report. Adjacent to Navarre on N.E. 28th Ave., Angel Face took over what was the bar portion of the now-closed Chin Yen.

The bar offers a short food menu, including oysters, meat and cheese boards, salads, steak tartare and mussels inside its hand-painted walls. There is no set cocktail menu, rather a list of spirits.

Tipplers will find a familiar face behind the bar, former Ten 01 and June bartender, Kelly Swenson, who was most recently at Spirit of 77.

The bar is open 5 p.m.-midnight Sunday-Thursday and 5 p.m.-1 a.m. Friday-Saturday.

STORRS SMOKEHOUSE: This casual barbecue restaurant from the owners of The Painted Lady, Jessica Bagley and Allen Routt, will be opening next month in Newberg.

Pit master Loal Stahlnecker will be putting out 18-hour brisket, 12-hour pulled pork, pastrami, oak- or alder-smoked ribs, coleslaw, macaroni and cheese and melted butter biscuits. Their sauce, which is still in the works, will include pinot noir. The restaurant will open sometime in April at 310 E. First St. Newberg.

SILVER MOON CREPERIE: This restaurant will open in mid-May at 4220 N. Mississippi Ave., in the former Honey Pot Bakery location.

The restaurant, which will serve sweet and savory crepes, local ciders on tap, beer and wine, was originally started in New Hampshire, but owner Chris Therrien and his wife sold it and relocated to Portland in September 2013.

THE CULTURED CAVEMAN: "Portland's first Paleo-friendly food cart" will be opening a



ASSOCIATED PRESS/2007

Al Pacino was spotted Saturday eating at Ristorante Roma in downtown Portland.

brick and mortar location in the former E-San Thai Cuisine spot on North Denver, 8233 N. Denver Ave. No news yet on when the restaurant will open.

Owners Heather Hunter and Joe Ban also run three food carts around Portland: in N.E. at 15th Ave. and Alberta St.; in S.E. at 41st Ave. and Hawthorne Blvd.; and a location downtown on S.W. Third Ave. and Stark St. In 2012, The Cultured Caveman was one of Michael Russell's best new food carts.

CELEBRITY SPOTTING: Al Pacino, the Academy Award-winning actor whose movies include "The Godfather" trilogy, "Scarface," "Dog Day Afternoon," "Serpico" and "Heat" made a surprise appearance at a downtown Portland Italian restaurant Saturday evening.

"The reservation was under a different name," said Ristorante Roma owner Alex Petrache. "I heard about 20 minutes before he came that it was Mr. Pacino."

Pacino arrived with a party of seven at 6:30 p.m. and stayed for about two hours, eating a typical Italian meal featuring a primo — a small pasta course —

followed by a secundo, or main entree, and contorni, or sides. "He ate everything," notes Petrache.

After the meal, Pacino posed for photos with Ristorante Roma waitstaff and a customer. Petrache did not find out why Pacino is in Portland. Petrache grew up in Romania before moving to Rome, where he lived and cooked professionally for about 17 years, opened Ristorante Roma in 2005. He's not sure who recommended the restaurant to Pacino.

Petrache, a longtime fan of Pacino, says his favorite movies include "The Godfather" and "Scarface."

"Who's isn't a fan of Al Pacino?" Petrache says. "He's one of the best actors in the world."

Visit Ristorante Roma at 622 S.W. 12th Ave. or call 503-241-2692

MOVIE ROLE: Portland's St. Honore Bakery has produced a pastry inspired by Wes Anderson's "Grand Budapest Hotel."

In the movie, which opens Friday, fictional baker Herr Mendl makes a delicate, cream-filled confection he calls the Courtesan au Chocolat — essentially, a three-tiered take on the French pastry called the religieuse.

"Grand Budapest" distributor Fox Searchlight Pictures reached out to St. Honore, looking for a bakery to produce the pastry in conjunction with the film's wider release.

St. Honore's spin on the religieuse features two choux pastries, one filled with raspberry cream, the other with lemon, double-stacked and decorated with buttercream. Samples will be served at a pre-screening at the Lloyd Center on Friday and are already available for \$6 at St. Honore's locations in Northwest Portland, Southeast Portland and Lake Oswego.



TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO: JIM CLARK

The walls at Ristorante Roma set the tone for the food, which bears the mark of owner Alexandru Petrache's time in Italy.

Ristorante Roma

Ristorante Roma is easy to miss. It's a small spot squeezed into the middle of a busy block. Inside it's bright and neat and simply decorated. Large framed pictures of Italian landmarks adorn the walls.

The casual and comfortable restaurant is owned and operated by Alexandru Petrache. Originally from Romania, he moved to Italy when he was 15 and lived and cooked there for almost 20 years.

His Italian experience is evident in the restaurant's wonderful homey pasta dishes.

Rich tomato sauce with mushrooms and sausage coats perfectly cooked pappardelle noodles. Calories taste fantastic in creamy spaghetti carbonara with pancetta, egg and lots of cheese. Basic spaghetti and tomato sauce tastes superfresh, the sauce slightly tangy and vaguely sweet.

There are several antipasti choices, including crunchy bruschetta, inspired salads, a platter of Italian meats and cheeses, and a large plate of mussels with white wine, garlic and tomatoes.

Vegetarians will enjoy the antipasto plate of grilled vegetables.

Entrees range from traditional *osso buco* (braised veal shank), beef tenderloin and pan-roasted sea bass.

Prices are reasonable, portions are generous and a nice wine list with several by-the-glass options seals the deal.

— Liz Colie Gadberry

Address/phone: 622 S.W. 12th Ave., 503-241-2692

Hours: 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday-Friday, 5 p.m. to 10 p.m. Saturday

Entree prices: \$10.75-\$21.75

Saucebox

After 12 years, this Pan-Asian supper and dance club still feels as ripe as a squishy persimmon.

The return last year of founding chef Chris Israel brought fresh life to the menu and a renewed professionalism to the staff. Maybe it's a New York City influence Israel picked up in his years away, but now there's a smoother coexistence between the posh dining room and the adjoining, pulsating club.

Saucebox feels urban but not exclusive, and the menu is just as catholic in its tastes, ranging freely across the Pacific Rim.

There's a pupu platter and Hawaiian swordfish, Vietnamese salad rolls, salmon with Javanese sauce and Thai beef salad. All are produced with an appreciation for the regional cuisines but a bold confidence that elevates the standard to the sublime.

Thai green curry rises several steps above the usual mush available at every neighborhood joint, with a panoply of still distinctive and crisp vegetables bathed in a deeply layered sauce. Spicy chicken-stuffed potstickers have a bright gingery jolt, and crab cakes get kicks of head-clearing red curry and sour kaffir lime and come with a cooling side of green papaya salad.

As one might expect from a successful nightclub, the cocktails are exceptional, with a bevy of infused vodkas and liquors adding intense flavor to drinks both typical and unexpected.

— Audrey Van Buskirk

Address/phone: 214 S.W. Broadway, 503-241-3393

Hours: 5 p.m. to 10 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday
Entree prices: \$17-\$26

Sungari

It can feel like a noble quest passing through the labyrinth that is downtown Portland under construction. But once you've made it inside Sungari, relax.

The space is calm with dark wood, white walls and good feng shui. It's fine for a quick lunch, but the affable staff accommodates lingerers just as willingly.

The Chinese cooking is Portland's finest, if you're looking for dishes you've heard of like kung pao shrimp, moo shu pork and dry sautéed string beans. Even the fried rice is exceptional.

The must-have dish is the sweet, chewy, spicy sesame beef served over a crunchy bed of rice noodles. It's not a bad idea to get two orders; it's that good.

In fact, you won't be disappointed with any of the old standards such as the crunchy General Tso's chicken; it bears no resemblance to the flavorless monochromatic mush served under the same name at so many fast-food Asian eateries.

Don't stint on the appetizers — this section of the menu holds some of the best surprises. The scallion pancake is savory and light.

The wontons with peanuty Sichuan sauce have just the right level of fire. More typical but not any less tasty, meaty potstickers balance filling and casing perfectly, and the barbecue pork slices with their painted pink outsides make a terrific pre-meal snack.

If you're feeling extravagant, call in advance and order the Peking duck. Served with plum sauce in thin rice pancakes, moo shu style, the crackling, ruddy, deeply flavored duck gives a little taste of the rich life.

— Audrey Van Buskirk

Address/phone: 735 S.W. First Ave., 503-224-0800

Hours: 11 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Monday-Friday, 5 p.m. to 9 p.m. Monday-Thursday, 5 p.m. to 10 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 4:30 p.m. to 9 p.m. Sunday

Entree prices: \$7.95-\$18.95

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Reader recommendation pays off in perfect pappardelle

I'm very grateful to readers who contact me with restaurant tips. I already had received two e-mails suggesting I try **Ristorante Roma** (622 S.W. 12th Ave., 503-241-2692) when I received a message from a BlackBerry one night that said "Try Roma 622 SW 12th."

The brevity of the message and the fact that the sender apparently couldn't wait until he or she got home to send it made it seem urgent, like an old-fashioned telegram.

I decided it was time to visit. Ristorante Roma is easy to miss. It's a small spot squeezed into the middle of a busy block. Inside it's bright and neat and simply decorated. Large framed pictures of Italian landmarks adorn the walls.

Alexandru Petrache is Ristorante Roma's handsome and dignified owner and chef. Born in Romania, he moved to Italy when he was 15 and lived there for almost 20 years working in restaurants and learning how to cook. He speaks fluent Italian.

In 2004, Petrache vacationed along the West Coast and noticed a lot of opportunities here. He moved to Portland in 2005 and quietly opened Ristorante Roma just over a year ago.

In a town stuffed fuller than a manicotti with Italian restaurants, Ristorante Roma is a welcome addition. One bite of the fresh pappardelle (long, flat noodles) with mushrooms and sausage in a creamy tomato sauce and I knew I'd be back for more. The delicious sauce is rich but not thick, and the

Liz Colie Gadberry



TASTE

noodles are perfectly cooked.

Even the basic spaghetti with tomato sauce, which could easily be boring, was very good.

In addition to several pasta dishes (five with seafood), the restaurant offers a fine selection of salads. I chose the excellent insalata Roma with thinly sliced salmon, artichoke hearts and bay shrimp dressed with tangy vinaigrette. Big enough to share, it can be ordered with mixed greens or straight arugula for those who like peppery greens.

Other starters include a large plate of mussels with white wine, garlic and tomatoes, which I enviously watched two people swoon over.

There's also an antipasto plate of various cheeses and meats. Vegetarians have nothing to whine about with the antipasto plate of grilled vegetables.

Entrees range from traditional *osso buco* (braised veal shank), beef tenderloin and pan-roasted sea bass.

Prices are reasonable (the most expensive pasta is lobster ravioli at \$16.75, and the *osso buco* is \$21.75), and servings are generous.

Look for Petrache to open another Italian restaurant in about a year. This one will be



TRIBUNE PHOTO: JIM CLARK

While the food at Ristorante Roma conjures images of Italy, the pictures of Roman landmarks adorning the walls do their share of helping out, too.

in Northwest Portland, which seems to me like opening another Vietnamese restaurant on upper Sandy Boulevard. Just how many Italian restaurants can Northwest Portland sustain?

For now at least, I'm sticking to sweet little Ristorante Roma, and next time I'm getting those mussels.

Ristorante Roma is open 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday

through Friday and 5 p.m. to 10 p.m. Saturday.

By the time you read this, **Graze Restaurant** (939 N.W. 10th Ave.) will have closed. It opened last summer in the space formerly inhabited by Nina's Place, which also failed.

I went to Graze once about four months ago and, while a couple of the dishes weren't

bad, they weren't good enough to lure me, or apparently almost anyone else, back.

I've noticed since then that the space has been close to empty even at 8 p.m. on a Saturday night.

A couple is in negotiations now to lease the space and open an Indian restaurant there. Two suggestions for breaking the curse on the location: Downplay the walls of

windows and lose at least one of the three entrances.

I look forward to checking out the new place. Unlike Italian, Vietnamese or Thai restaurants, there's no question Portland can stand more Indian restaurants.

Stay tuned for more information.

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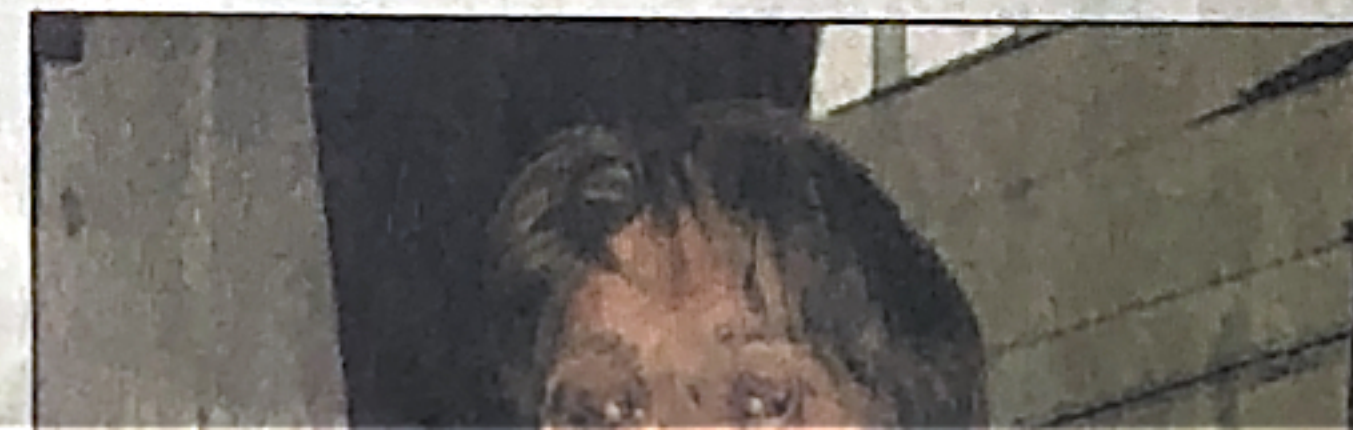
Elves cobble a shoe story that fits all



Weekend! Events

Adventure!

By SUZIE RIDGWAY
for The Tribune



RESTAURANT OF THE WEEK: RISTORANTE ROMA



No-frills Italian food makes the grade at a new Italia outpost in Southwest Portland.

TRIBUNE PHOTO: DAVID PLECHL

Eat as the Romans do, no flight required

Imagine you're in Italy. Now imagine you're in Italy in Portland.

While the real Eternal City, with the Sistine Chapel, the Colosseum and the Pantheon, clearly has charms that exceed those of Portland's Southwest 12th Avenue, the new Ristorante Roma does offer a sweet dose of authentic Italia.

For one thing, the servers have lovely accents and don't actually speak much English at all. This may lead to humorous or irritating excesses, depending what sort of mood you're in.

Order from the "Meat & Fish" section of the menu, and, to your surprise, your meal will be preceded by a mixed salad, which is a bit of a bother if you've already ordered and been served a mixed salad from the "entrees" portion. And while there's nothing wrong with the simple lettuce and tomato, served with cruets of oil and balsamic vinegar for blending your own dressing, most diners probably aren't going to want more than one head.

The entrees section includes such beginnings as generous antipasto platters with either sliced meats and cheese or vegetables. The "vegetale misto" was more interesting than the straightforward meats, with well-oiled grilled eggplant and zucchini offering contrasting textures to marinated peppers and firm, large beans.

Another entree, tortellini in broth, would make a terrific lunch. It's a large, deep bowl with freshly cooked meat tortellini in hot soup flecked with bits of vegetables.

As in traditional cafes in Italy — there are some in New York City, too — take the menu literally. The *tilapia con olive*, described as a tilapia filet in a white wine sauce topped with olives, is exactly that: a large portion of meltingly tender fish in a simple sauce brightened by lemon and meaty black olives. No truffle oil, no grilled arugula shavings, no baby vegetables on the side.

The pasta dishes (which don't come with salad) nearly all cost less than \$9, and the portions are big enough to satisfy a Pavarotti appetite. Large raviolis are filled with ricotta and spinach and draped in a meaty tomato sauce. The balance between sauce and noodle is well-struck here and in a hearty, rich rigatoni carbonara, which sparked a conversation about love for bacon that lasted at least three days.

For dessert, the rectangular slab of tiramisu is so perfectly rendered, with distinct layers of cream and cake and chocolate, you'll peer over your shoulder to make sure no one's going to take it away. The espresso, of course, is excellent.

Ristorante Roma sits on stretch of downtown Portland that seems weirdly busy on weekend nights. The light switch is turned up higher than in many local restaurants, and I heard a few mildly disparaging "you could perform brain surgery in here" sorts of comments. But the exposed look, completed by faux fresco paintings on one wall, a deli case housing a few giant mounds of meat and cheese and simple tables and chairs, seems to fit with the aesthetic of a place where it's all about the food on the plate. And taking a virtual trip abroad.

— Audrey Van Buskirk

622 S.W. 12th Ave., 503-241-2692, 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday-Friday, 5 p.m. to 10 p.m. Saturday, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Sunday, \$8.25-\$18