

# CRAIN'S

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## NEW YORK BUSINESS

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### A secret garden near the Garden

### Italianish cuisine with the Devils at Penn Plaza's Lugo Caffé.

I couldn't get any of my usual reviewing dinner pals to go to Lugo Caffé. As soon as I said, "Penn Plaza near Madison Square Garden," they would ask, "What else is on your list?" Then dramaturge nephew Gabe and wife Mia came to town from La Jolla, not so hip to Manhattan geography. I spot them happily settled at the bar, wide-screen video on either side, "La Dolce Vita" motto overhead, all set for a glamorous New York evening with Aunt Gael. We retreat to the quieter back room with its wall of wine and frieze of stills from Italian movies, Marcello Mastroianni staring down at us.

And please don't accuse me of throwing these innocents to the wolves. Tao and Rue 57 veteran chef Sam Hazen had e-mailed me that he'd done a great job shaking up the kitchen as the consultant here. I expected to eat well. I don't know what was there before Sam arrived, but what we're sharing tonight is mostly delicious Italianish food for New Yorkers—excessive, occasionally a bit over the top—as in the good but not-very-Italian meatball pizza with ricotta, mozzarella, roasted tomato and the vaguely annoying sweetness of caramelized onions. I'm surprised to see the chef here on a Saturday night, stopping by to wow our guests with reports of athlete sightings—New York Giants, New Jersey Devils, a special thrill for hockey stalwart Mia (yes, they do play women's hockey in San Diego).

And just as Mr. Hazen had boasted to lure me here, the huge and crunchy pork shank, layered with juicy morsels of pig under crisped fat skin, is a winner. It arrives on a not-quite-large-enough wooden board for us to carve at the table, scattering garlands of chopped peppers both sweet and hot. Enough for four, maybe enough for six. Certainly too much for us after marvelous balloon meatballs and the platter of prosciutto and house-made mozzarella with fig jam—sent by the chef—plus crispy baby artichokes with tangy lemon aioli, tuna tartare and a trio of vegetable antipasti we ordered and two pastas we'd already divided. Menus with so many different categories are brilliantly designed to trick the hungry into ordering more. Still, the pricing is gentle: \$4 for a vegetable tasting bowl, entrées \$24 to \$29, desserts starting at \$7.

Not that I would have skipped the first-rate bucatini alla matriciana, remarkably al dente. Fruity Dolcetto d'Alba, just \$35 on a list of vini della casa, is perfect with all of these show-off flavors.

Be warned, there is less pleasure in ahi tuna tartare, overwhelmed by cured tomato. And I sent back the eggplant caponata and the brussels sprouts that tasted as if someone had salted them twice.

A week later, my guy Stephen and I return to taste more. We share a marvelous whole-leaf romaine Caesar and textbook-perfect linguine alla vongole with arugula sprouts. The house stocks Clausthaler, his favorite nonalcoholic beer, and skirt steak is one of his favorite cuts. Tonight's is chewy and rare and very good once we've cut away the mahogany edge that tastes overly salty from its marinade. I'm unhappy with the excessive oiliness of the wild mushroom pizza. Mr. Hazen—caught standing at the door as we arrive with no reservation—stops by our table later and defends the pizza, saying it's oily from the provolone cheese and truffle preserved in oil. I guess we'll be trying the Margherita next time, even if Lugo remains our own secret "garden," along with that of the sports fans and concert-goers filling the terrace tables tonight.

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