

Find some Italian soul in the heart of Little Italy

Hayley Juhl

Montreal has a deep, rich history. It is evidenced in the city's architecture, its culture and its politics. We acknowledge it yet remain one step removed, because in the era of social media, who has time to go backward?

Make time. Pull back that curtain during an evening at Da Enrico, in the heart of Little Italy.

It's the smell that gets you first: freshly baked bread.

The garlic bread that arrives at your red-check-clothed table is soft and doughy and dissolves on your tongue like snowflakes. An amiable waiter uncorks your wine and a smiling waitress, who has just earned her degree in cognitive science and theatre, fills your glass.

Chef and owner Riccardo Padulo is busy in the open kitchen, but his father, Henri, has time to say hello to a couple of newcomers. He lived in this restaurant as a boy, though it wasn't a restaurant then; it was the community's first grocery store. Every day, his mother would carry the dining table onto the street and cover it with chocolates for sale, later with pasta and vegetables. At the end of the day, she would carry it back inside in time for dinner.

The antipasti is the same as his grandmother and mother would serve at home, Riccardo says. Lightly grilled zucchini and eggplant, olives, cheese and meats served in light oil and vinegar and sprinkled with just-ground pepper. The salad is crisp and drizzled



Henri (left) and Riccardo Padulo in the kitchen, which was once Henri's bedroom.

with oil and balsamic vinegar. Everything is fresh. Padulo visits the market every morning to ensure quality.

Their roots in the community are deep. Henri founded the Canadian Italian Businessmen's Association and his stories are peppered with not-yet-forgotten names: Duplessis, Bourassa, St. Laurent, Peladeau. His uncle was the first Italian city councillor, serving under Mayor Camilien Houde.

On the wall next to you is a picture of the uncle, surrounded by others in the family and of community leaders.

"I love how homey it is," your companion says, referring to the restaurant itself. "It's the perfect mix of French Quebec and Italian."

A bell interrupts before you can

reply. Riccardo has alerted the wait staff that the main course is ready to be served, still on its skillet, as they do in the old country.

The penne surprises you with a tangy sweet underflavour. The veal, evenly cooked, lightly breaded, perfectly textured, delights. None of the food is overspiced; the pasta itself is a conduit to the freshly made sauce.

Your companion is taken aback by the tortellini in cream sauce.

"This is the best I've ever had. It makes me want to lick my plate," she confesses, choosing instead to mop up the last bits of sauce with fresh bread. "It's so pure."

If, indeed, the tortellini makes you feel somewhat closer to God, it might be because Riccardo was trained at

the Vatican. He had earned a law degree at McGill, but left Canada in 1980 before taking the bar exam. Three years later and freshly graduated from a culinary school in the Vatican, he interned at the luxury Hotel Berliini in Rome and spent time in a wine village in Tuscany. Da Enrico's summer courtyard evokes the same feeling you'd get in that small village, or in Rome, Riccardo says.

You're still reeling from the pasta and veal when the waiter arrives with Suicide Cake, four storeys of chocolate layered with more of the same. It's so sweet, your coffee won't need sugar. Your coffee won't need sugar anyway: the cappuccino is mild and smooth. The espresso is dark and strong. It is a good ending to two hours of culinary decadence.

"We eat when we eat," Henri says. "We celebrate. It's a festivity every day."

Da Enrico came to life in 1969 on Cremazie Blvd. It remained there till 2000, and opened at its current location in 2003. It's a full circle for the family that founded the area's first grocery store in the same building in 1905.

Former MP Mark Assad is pleased to find one of his favourite places has reopened. After a hearty meal, he says of Da Enrico: "The atmosphere is as good as the menu – and that's tremendous."

Da Enrico, 264 St. Zotique E., (514) 388-0719. Table d'hote from \$20-\$30. Bring your own wine. Children under 12 eat free on Sundays. Reservations recommended.