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New downtown Italian restaurants

Get your Italian fix at Centro, J. Rocco and coming-soon Tre Soldi

June 21, 2013 | By Erin Brereton, @Erbrer09 | For RedEye

If you thought River North was at capacity for Italian restaurants with the openings of Siena Tavern from "Top Chef" fan favorite Fabio Viviani and Bill and Giuliana Rancic's RPM Italian, think again. The recent debut of Centro and J. Rocco's Italian Table & Bar proves that this bustling neighborhood isn't yet at capacity for marinara and meatballs. With another option, Tre Soldi, set to debut in Streeterville this weekend, it's getting even easier to nab a taste of Italy without leaving downtown. Here's the lowdown on the latest.



Bucatini alla amatriciana at Tre Soldi.

Centro
6 W. Hubbard St. 312-988-7775

Italian roots: Centro is a reboot of the popular 1990s eatery of the same name from Rosebud Restaurants. If your parents dined at the original 710 N. Wells St. location back in the day, they might recognize some of the Southern Italian dishes and decor, including signed pics of Marlon Brando and other classic celebs.

Most authentic: The Eight Finger Cavatelli takes its name from its preparation, meaning it takes eight fingers to roll Centro's homemade dough into long, dumpling-shaped pasta, which is served with your choice of sauce (\$21). Chef Joe Farina recommends topping it with his rich tomato-vodka sauce, made with mascarpone cheese and Absolut. "Everything's served in large stainless steel pans that are great for sharing," Farina says. "We encourage family-style."

Least authentic: Centro's menu focuses on traditional Italian fare, but the shrimp milanese (\$28) comes with an unusual extra: lobster coleslaw. This side dish made with coldwater Australian lobster tails is more inspired by summer than Southern Italy.

Steals: Centro's meatballs are a hefty eight ounces each, served in marinara with whipped ricotta on the side (\$14 for two).

Splurge-worthy: The 48-ounce prime T-bone (\$88) feeds two to five people, making it just right to share with pals who have big appetites—and wallets.

J. Rocco Italian Table & Bar
749 N. Clark St. 312-475-0271

Italian roots: Chef Steve Chiappetti's family hails from Calabria, the tip of Italy's boot, and he returns to visit every few years. His roots in the Chicago restaurant scene are just as deep, having worked at both Rhapsody and Viand; in the 1990s, he owned Mango, located just a block from where J. Rocco is now.



Most authentic: "All the pastas," Chiappetti said. "[Calabria] is the biggest area surrounded by coastal sea, so we also have a lot of seafood and meat dishes." The raviolini (\$14), made with spicy Italian sausage, is a regional favorite, and J. Rocco also serves seven Italian microbrews. Chiappetti's favorite is the Demon Hunter ale (\$11) from Birrificio Montegioco, which has notes of coriander and, at more than 8 percent alcohol, is almost like having two beers. Also on tap, look for Birrificio del Ducato's Verdi Imperial stout (\$11), which Chiappetti said features chocolate and chili flavors.

Least authentic: Everything on the menu has a strong Italian influence, Chiappetti said; however, he borrowed some favorites from his previous restaurants, including onion-crust sturgeon with brown butter-sage sauce (\$24), a signature dish at Rhapsody in the late '90s.

Steals: For the \$21 price tag, the cioppino features an impressive array of halibut, scallops or other catch-of-the-day picks, braised and served in a saffron, fennel and tomato broth.

Splurge-worthy: Grilled sirloin steak marinated with rosemary and garlic is one of the most expensive items at \$24. For a splurge in the calorie department, the mezza luna (\$15), a plate full of four-cheese ravioli with truffle cream sauce, should do the trick.

Tre Soldi
212 E Ohio St. 312-664-0212

Italian roots: Set to open this weekend, this Streeterville eatery from Coco Pazzo owner Jack Weiss will serve dishes inspired by Italy's capital, Rome. "We're calling it a 'trattoria-pizzeria,'" said chef Brandon Wolff, who previously worked at River North Italian eateries Osteria Via Stato and La Madia.

Most authentic: The crispy, thin-crust Roman-style pizzas. Look for a white pie made with pecorino, sausage, potatoes and rosemary (around \$14).

Least authentic: Wolff wants to keep the menu as Italian as possible while using locally grown Midwestern ingredients, rather than cheese or meats shipped in from Europe. "For example, we found a sheep's milk ricotta-style cheese made in Wisconsin that we're going to use for pasta fillings," he said.

Steals: Pastas, which will be in the \$12-\$16 range. "We're trying to keep the price point at under \$30," Wolff says. "This restaurant is a trattoria, which in Italy is a more casual restaurant."

Splurge-worthy: The menu will include roasted seabream stuffed with fennel and lemon and a mix of daily seafood selections such as clams and monkfish (\$28-\$30). Combined with tomatoes, herbs and fish stock, the whole deal is steamed inside parchment paper with tomatoes, which a server will slice open at your table (\$25-\$26).

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