

Courtesy Villa d'Este



Calculated Italian Elegance

Who says that mathematics doesn't have its place in the fine dining scene?

By Nicolè A. Staab

I'm a facts-and-figures kind of girl: Show me numbers and give me details, please. Everything in life comes down to numbers for me – even a fine dining experience – so in its most basic form, a restaurant review is just a mathematical equation. Add together the basics of the equation – food quality, atmosphere, service and timing – divide by the price and you've got the overall value of your dining experience.

A friend recently told me that my standards are too high, and I'll be the first to admit that I had high expectations for Villa d'Este. This Italian restaurant had made a name for itself, and I anticipated nothing but sophistication from start to finish. Villa d'Este did not disappoint: If

anything, it exceeded my expectations.

As with many restaurants, Villa d'Este changes its menu seasonally, but this fall the menu wasn't the only new thing around the kitchen: Domenico Acampora, a top chef from Italy, recently joined the team.

Upon crossing the Villa d'Este threshold, the bustle of the Conrad Cairo's lounge dissolves into an atmosphere of tranquility and elegance. One large, glittering chandelier lights the dining area, which is gracefully designed around a colorful, wall-length mural of an Italian village.

A hushed romantic ballad played as we were ushered to our table overlooking the tree-filled atrium. The table's candles created a glow of privacy, although we were seated right next to a group of people, which wasn't necessary given that there

were plenty of free tables. Our waiter politely asked us to put our mobile phones on silent mode, a move I found very classy – until a noisy ring tone sliced into the restaurant's murmured conversations, signaling an obvious inconsistency in compliance with the request.

Even if we hadn't been as hungry as we were, I'm sure we would have been just as menu-mesmerized by the page of appetizers and soups, the array of pastas and the myriad meat and seafood entrées. Everything we ordered was fantastic. When we finished, I asked to speak with Chef Acampora, a jovial fellow, to inquire about how long his new menu had been in effect.

He looked puzzled for a moment and replied, "This isn't the new menu; we plan to start it next week."

Worry seized me for a moment – the whole purpose of my visit was to review the new menu – but then I relaxed. I looked over at my dinner companion and the chef, smiled and said, "I guess I just have to convince my boss I have to come back." The next day at the office, I informed my editor and hurriedly explained that it was no problem at all for me to go back again when the new menu came out. Besides, I would be the best person for the job since I already tasted the original menu offerings and had a baseline with which to compare the new one.

One week later, I walked back into the restaurant, and my friend and I were both greeted by name. That in itself was impressive, but it was the waitstaff's friendly professionalism and attentiveness that scored them a perfect ten in the service category.

Again, I was struck with the dilemma of which choices could possibly make the most delicious meal. The new menu had just as many options as the previous one, featuring healthy choices, signature dishes and a variety of appetizers starting at LE 26, pasta at LE 24, and entrées ranging from LE 58 to LE 250. Ordering this time was much easier as Chef Acampora came out himself to welcome us and offer his recommendations. His advice? The Tian di Aragosta starter (LE 130) and the braised lamb shank (LE 88). We took his advice and selected the Funghi Portobello starter (LE 65) as well.

Served with flavored polenta, the large portion of grilled portobello mushrooms was layered with thin slices of mascarpone ▶▶

◀ cheese and dressed with a thick shallot sauce. The Tian di Aragosta, a warm lobster and peach *tian* (a moist, mound-shaped baked rice dish) with curried coconut coulis and caramelized peach, was sweet and a nice contrast to the slightly salty mushrooms.

Just before the main course arrived, the waiter brought out the chef's special risotto. Combined with celery and fresh pears, the Carnaroli rice was blanketed with Tuscan Pecorino cheese and topped with fresh pear sherbet. The hot-cold, rice and sherbet combination was a deliciously imaginative contrast.

Like clockwork, the waitstaff whisked the appetizer plates from the table and allowed us a single sigh of relief before the entrée came: a work-of-art shank of lamb. The

generous portion of tender meat was glazed in a citrus honey atop a bed of creamy, seasoned mashed potatoes. A side of melon and mint salad added vivid color, making the plate resemble a painter's palette. The homemade lasagnette (LE 110) with sea scallops velouté and crab meat was thick and rich, without the fishy after-taste that often plagues seafood pastas.

My stomach demanded that I stop eating, but my mind and taste buds were ready to indulge in dessert. And for the sake of a well-rounded restaurant review, I succumbed. We ordered Frutti di Bosco (LE 32) — red berries with gratinated lime thyme, sabayon and almond tuile — and the carrot cake (LE 32), which I could smell before even tasting it. I felt like I was eating a piece

of art as my fork slid smoothly through the moist orange carrot cake drizzled with ginger cream cheese and topped with a smooth scoop of raspberry sherbet. The first bite dissolved in my mouth, giving way to instant satisfaction and a smile.

Reviewing Villa d'Este was a delicious problem to solve. According to my calculations — and my empty plates and full tummy — Villa D'Este served up all the components of a fine dining experience. Then again, that was just what I had expected. *et*

VILLA D'ESTE • Conrad Cairo • 1191 Corniche El-Nil • Downtown • Tel: (02) 580-8440 • Open 7:30pm to 12:30am • Prices place it in the Extremely Expensive category • Reservations recommended, formal attire

Oh, Elusive Bagel!

Filling the bagel-shaped hole in your soul

By Jessica Olien

THE BAGEL IS as indispensable a part of many Americans' diets as the fuul sandwich is of Egyptians'. This breadly doughnut of innovation has garnered something of a cult following in major US cities, but finding a quality version of this perfect coffee companion outside of the West can prove a daunting task.

Often imitated, rarely duplicated, the properties of a bagel are difficult to master: They must be boiled and then baked to obtain the optimum chewy center and firm crust. My experiences with bagels in Egypt thus far have been dire: My most recent would-be bagel arrived crispy enough to warrant a chainsaw and was accompanied by a piddly little container of what could be called cream cheese only in appearance. I was losing hope.

Fortunately — for the cynical New Yorker and the Midwestern farmer's daughter alike — there is now a place to fill that bagel-shaped hole in one's uprooted life — Jared's Bagels has finally opened in Maadi. Once only a delivery service, Jared's has just set up shop on Road 9 and now offers a variety of bona fide bagels toasted to order.

Like a luxury car, the beautiful thing about the bagel is how easily it is customized. Bagels at Jared's can be ordered toasted or not, with your choice of yummy spread smeared on top.

Whipped honey butter (LE 2) and fruit-flavored cream cheeses (LE 4) are also available for purchase in large-sized tubs (LE 14-18) to take home. There are 14 flavors of bagel to choose from, ranging from sweet cinnamon crunch or apricot to savory olive, sesame or sun-dried tomato and basil — a bagel for every craving. Jared's will bake bagels to order and offers a LE 6 discount when you buy a dozen to pack home.

To take the glamorous bagel (prices start at LE 4 per bagel and top out at LE 6) from breakfast to lunch, Jared's offers a tantalizing selection of sandwich toppings. Are you a salami kind of guy? It's yours for LE 15. Maybe you'd prefer smoked turkey with red cheddar and Dijon mustard? It's also LE 15. Or a delicate little cucumber and cream cheese number? That'll be LE 9. Or perhaps you'd like to get a little crazy and turn your bagel into a pizza (LE 13). I know — you think it can't be done, but trust me, I saw it with my own eyes.

And if you're the sort who doesn't like bagels at all, Jared's has muffins (LE 4-5), granola (LE 40 for a kilogram, LE 16 for



Bemoan the bagel's absence no more

a bag of four granola bars) and Belgian waffles (LE 12-15) that are sure to satisfy (and if not, you have problems). *et*

JARED'S BAGELS • 82 Road 9 • 200 meters south of the Maadi metro station • Maadi • Tel: (02) 705-8349 / (012) 788-8702 • www.jaredsbagels.com • Storefront hours are 6:30am to 9pm, baked-to-order delivery 6:30am to 4pm • Prices place it easily in the Inexpensive category