

SILVERTON'S DOUGH RISES TO THE OCCASION AT PIZZERIA

Natalie Haughton
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It's not surprising that Nancy Silverton, founder of La Brea Bakery and former co-owner of Campanile, is making lots of dough again. But this time it's pizza dough -- and she's become the city's chi-chi pizza queen.

She's teamed up with Italian cuisine guru Mario Batali and restaurateur **Joe Bastianich** at Pizzeria Mozza, which opened late last year.

A small place that's hot and hip, it features amazing upscale pizzas. There's nothing conventional about them -- no smothering of marinara or mozzarella (despite the name of the place). Instead, the bread is thin, light, airy and springy, and the gourmet toppings are allowed to star.

The prosciutto di Parma pizza (\$14) was appealing, colorful and delicious, with thin slices of top-quality prosciutto and fresh basil. A pizza of very lean fennel-and-pork sausage (\$14) -- the most popular pizza, we were told -- was disappointing, as the presentation lacked color and appeal with five, inch-size balls of sausage on top of the melted cheese. But the basic Margherita (\$10) was excellent.

We fell in love with the Coach Farm goat cheese, leek, green garlic & bacon pizza (\$14) -- with dynamite flavor and attractive looks. Other favorites were the funghi misti (\$13) and the burrata (\$14).

Seasonal squash blossoms

As for starters, a signature antipasti is the fried squash blossoms (\$8), but don't get your hopes up. At a 5 p.m. dinner, a waitress sheepishly announced that they were already out of them; a staffer later noted that squash blossoms are a seasonal menu item, based entirely on what's available at local farmers' markets.

Don't miss the marinated peppers (\$8), a wonderful blend of red and gold mini peppers served in a mixture of balsamic vinegar, olive oil and capers; a tangy white-bean puree alla Toscana (\$7); oven-roasted olives (\$8); or cauliflower gratinate (\$8), irresistible, rich and cheesy.

Among the five insalate offerings, the Mozza caprese salad (\$12) is a must. It's a winner with melt-in-your mouth soft, creamy and decadent burrata cheese topped with roasted cherry tomatoes on the vine, lots of fresh basil and olive oil. Nancy's chopped salad (\$15), based on chopped iceberg and radicchio and very lightly tossed with an oregano dressing, was refreshing even though it had some bitter overtones and was a bit oniony and garlicky.

The piece de resistance carne choice was the affetati misti (\$24) -- a large platter of thinly sliced Italian meats such as prosciutto di Parma, salumi salami and more.

Save room for the tempting desserts, including a fabulous, light Meyer lemon pie with a dark graham cracker crust, caramel coppetta, any of a dozen sorbetti and gelati (any three served for \$7), and butterscotch budino, a creamy pudding with a decadent salty (fleur de sel) sweet caramel sauce.

Staff writer Eric Noland contributed to this review.

PIZZERIA MOZZA

Our rating: Three and one half stars

Details: 641 N. Highland Ave., Los Angeles; open noon to midnight daily. Info: (323) 297-0101.
www.mozza-la.com .

Cost: Starters \$7 to \$15, pizzas \$9 to \$17, daily specials \$17 to \$20 and market price, desserts \$8 to \$9.

Noteworthy: It's not easy to land a table. Call a month in advance to secure a reservation at one of the 13 tables. Seating at one of 22 stools is doled out on a first-come, first-served basis (many are at the pizza bar, in front of the wood-burning oven, where you can view all the action). Extensive selection of Italian wines, and the by-the-glass portions are generous -- a third of a bottle, served in a small carafe, suitable for sharing. A 2004 Aglianico Terredora (\$14) was a big hit.