



Duck ravioli with foie gras and truffles at L'Ardente.

# Savoring La Dolce Vita— and La Dulce Vida

TWO NEW D.C. SPOTS WORTH SWOONING OVER



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PHOTO: REY LOPEZ

As someone who likes to try as much of any given menu as possible, I usually bypass the bread basket and skip over the pasta section. So I was pretty jazzed recently to find a carb-free crab risotto featuring al dente riced calamari.

That genius trompe l'oeil dish comes from the team at L'Ardente, a glamorous modern Italian restaurant that recently opened in D.C.'s Capitol Crossing development. Owned by Eric Eden and chef David Deshaies—the team behind Unconventional Diner—the 180-seat spot employs a gilded Marra Forni pizza oven and a wood-burning grill from Spain in its open kitchen, from which fun dishes continuously emerge. Duck ravioli with foie gras and truffles practically waddle up to the table in web-footed ceramic duck cups; underrated cabbage takes a star turn when charred and tossed with beurre blanc, trout roe, and currants; and grilled artichokes and polenta are bedecked with light-as-air whipped parmesan. Come dessert, dense chocolate mousse is adorned with raspberry-roasted hazelnuts, and silky ricotta panna cotta with buttermilk, lemon oil, and avocado is as fetching as it is flavorful.

Up-and-coming sommelier Tiana Estremera is a delight, especially

passionate about Italian wines from lesser-known regions. Her by-the-glass recs are spot on: tangy Pecorino from Abruzzo; herbal Verdicchio from the Marche; and Cannonau, Sardinia's term for Grenache. The latter pairs especially well with a slice of 40-layer lasagna with short-rib sugo, truffled mornay sauce, and sottocenere cheese. It was a dish for which I gladly overlooked my carb aversion.

Speaking of showstoppers, a gorgeous rooftop bar graces Buena Vida, a new Mexican gastro-lounge in Arlington that's the latest concept from Street Guys Hospitality, the team behind Balkan restaurant Ambar across the street. Its third-floor city views and greenery-filled, Tulum jungle-inspired decor make for a perfect spot for a pre-dinner cocktail: The fuchsia-hued Azteca combines silver tequila with lemon and hibiscus topped with tequila foam, while a tart take on the Caipirinha incorporates rhubarb into cachaça with Aperol, lemon, and basil. Gin & Tonics come in three flavors: mint and grapefruit, lavender and strawberry, and pear and pink peppermint.

The small plates served downstairs can be hit or miss. Luckily, the large selection means that you're likely to find

## Buena Vida's Rhubarb Caipirinha.

at least a handful of keepers. Tender, slow-roasted lamb-shoulder barbacoa with pickled cabbage is a standout, as are confited baby back ribs with pascal sauce, a complex mixture of toasted pumpkin seeds, peanuts, and chiles braised with onions, garlic, and mint. Crunchy watermelon, jicama, and baby arugula salad is garnished with teeny-tiny popcorn kernels, while blistered shishito peppers are served over labneh-like jocoque sauce and topped with chile threads. A few chunks of sashimi-grade tuna get lost amid all the other accoutrements in a dish of ceviche, however, and thin slices of *cecina* (smoked, air-dried beef) that have been grilled too quickly arrive a bit dry. Meanwhile, fans of *huitlacoche*, the corn fungus rebranded as the more diner-friendly "corn truffle," can find the earthy ingredient both in an enchilada with Chihuahua cheese and poblano cream and on a corn flatbread with goat cheese and scallions. I suggest you end on a sweet note in the form of coconut rice pudding topped with berry dust and raspberry compote—then head back up to that even sweeter rooftop for a nightcap. **V**



A FRESH TAKE ON  
**Oktoberfest**



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