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Molto Bene! Santa Barbara's Toma

R. Daniel Foster · Friday, October 13th, 2023

There's plenty to choose from when considering waterfront dining in Santa Barbara. On a recent trip, I explored established Italian restaurants, so I checked out Toma along West Cabrillo Blvd. It's been some time since the food critic for the Santa Barbara News Press, Michael Cervin, called Toma's cuisine "close to perfection." I wanted to see if much had changed since 2013.

Toma's interior includes wood-beamed ceilings and stylish fixtures / Photo courtesy of Toma

In succeeding years (2014 through 2021), the restaurant captured Open Table's "Diners Choice Award." For five of those years (2014 through 2020), it was a TripAdvisor winner, capturing its "Traveler's Choice Award."

"Waterfront" is a bit of a misnomer since the restaurant, like similar establishments in the city, borders a boulevard. The ocean is out there, it's just across the traffic and a strip of sand. In truth, Toma's elegant friendly ambiance was sufficient. It's a romantic setting with wood-beamed ceilings, white tablecloths, stylish light fixtures, and a vine-covered adobe exterior and patio.

I also chose Toma because, after ten years, the establishment recently changed ownership—from Tom and Vicki Dolan who launched Toma in 2013, to third-generation Santa Barbaran Julian Sanders, a certified sommelier. Sanders' partners include Sam Grant, a veteran restaurateur from San Diego, Bill Parsons, and Richard Sanders, both natives of Santa Barbara.

"We just hired a new Chef—Colby J. Silva," Grant told me in an interview before I visited. "He was part of Caruso's receiving its Michelin star (at the Rosewood Miramar Beach Hotel). "He's a local boy, from Ventura. He loves fishing and buying local, and has great connections with local fishermen. We're very excited to have him on board as he takes us to a new level."

Toma's gnocchi / Photo: R. Daniel Foster

Grant says that he and his partners know they own a Santa Barbara tradition that packs in the regulars, so they're careful not to shake things up too much. "We felt like we were joining a family, so we've kept the same staff, and gotten to know the regulars," Grant says. "We found out what they like. So for example, we didn't take away things like the tuna cone."

Toma’s tuna cone / Photo: R. Daniel Foster

I sampled the tuna cone with my dining partner—four sesame cones stuffed with ahi sashimi, ginger, sesame, soy, chile, and chive. The cones are popped into a sculptural serving device fitted with round holes to hold the cones. The bright flavor contrasted well with the crisp sesame cones, all spiked with the bite of ginger and chile.

Toma’s tuna cone actually premiered in the 1990s when Toma was called Emilio’s. “The building has been around since the 1930s,” Grant says. “At one time, you could buy hot chicken and rabbit pie there for a nickel. It’s also been a fish and chips place, a candy store, and a rollerblade rental shop.”

The restaurant is named for Toma cheese, made primarily in the Aosta Valley and Piedmont regions of Northwestern Italy.

Grant also recommended the rigatoni. It’s served with Italian sausage, Parmesan, pomodoro, garlic, a drizzle of cream, oregano, and grape tomatoes. Also, the gnocchi, which true to Cervin’s 2013 review, was “close to perfection.” It included Argentinian red shrimp, dried tomato, fava beans, roasted garlic, and pomodoro. Rounding out that flavor medley was black truffle butter, lending the dish a trace of richness.

We also ordered the herb-crusted New Zealand rack of lamb, medium rare. The dish was slightly undercooked, but the flavors worked well—everything from braised fennel that added distinction, to borettane onions (a small onion popular in Italy that's packed with flavor), chickpeas, harissa (a hot chile pepper paste), and pomegranate molasses for some added complexity.

Toma's exterior / Photo courtesy of Toma

The overall menu has a nice range—everything from grilled Spanish octopus, squash blossoms, black spaghetti, and salmon to various salads and such standards as roasted chicken, ravioli, and lasagna.

For dessert, Grant recommended the warm chocolate torte—Belgian chocolate served with vanilla bean ice cream and marcona almond tuile. Also, the phyllo crisps are served with local strawberries, raspberry mousse, pistachio pastry, vanilla bean cream, and drizzled with a berry sauce.

"Toma has always been a place for anniversaries, birthdays, and other special occasions," Grant says. "It has a great tradition in Santa Barbara. Some of the staff has been here for ten to fifteen years. And we're very lucky to have Julian Sanders as a sommelier. He's assembled an amazing wine list, adding some more regional and California wines, and also some old world selections."

Toma’s New Zealand Rack of Lamb / Photo: R. Daniel Foster

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