



Photo courtesy of North Italia/Fox Restaurant Concepts

## North Italia Santa Monica Founded on Food with Integrity

Written by *Merilee Kern*

Sometimes a restaurateur comes along who changes the game. Raises the bar. Ups the ante. That's very much the case with Sam Fox—the creative visionary behind Fox Restaurant Concepts, which has taken hip and healthy hospitality to new heights. From dropping out of college and siphoning the tuition funds into his first restaurant endeavor at the age of 20, to now operating almost 50 locations and 14 unique concepts throughout the United States, Sam has cooked up one of America's fastest growing restaurant hospitality groups.

This 11-time James Beard Award “Outstanding Restaurateur” semifinalist and New York Times best-selling cookbook author boasts a litany of delicious dining brands, including a number of notables throughout Southern California such as The Henry in West Hollywood, Blanco Tacos & Tequila in San Diego and Flower Child in Santa Monica. Also ensconced in the heart of Santa Monica's famed 3rd Street Promenade is North Italia—a decidedly lively locale featuring scratch-made, season-driven, farm-to-table Italian fare that's offered alongside



inventive, drool-inducing, hand-shaken craft cocktails and beers.

While artisanal handmade pasta and pizza reigns supreme at North Italia, the food is closely rivaled by its bar program. With concoctions like Mozzafiato (Ketel One vodka, smashed cucumber, lime, Chateau aloe vera liqueur, and green chartreuse); Quiet Italian Gentleman (Bulleit Rye, Cocchi Vermouth di Torino, Campari, Disaronno Amaretto); And Julietta (ginger-infused Smirnoff, vanilla, St. Germain, lime, and Prosecco), there's an elixir for everyone. Locavore craft beers include options from Ballast Point, Green Flash, Stone Brewing Company and more.

Given my own penchant for seasonally-oriented, detail-driven food that's best realized with a handcrafted approach, I popped into North Italia for dinner service. It quickly became evident what all the fuss was about as, the mindfulness put toward curating top-quality ingredients and executing food with integrity is apparent. Here, details matter.

My journey through North Italia commenced with a Grilled Artichoke served with sea salt, truffle, Grana Padano (a semi-aged hard Italian cheese), and lemon aioli. Unlike the usual steamed version, North Italia's grilled variety has an earthy overtone that's beautifully tempered with the savory garnishments.

The Margherita pizza my party ordered as an appy also duly impressed, with its fresh mozzarella, red sauce, olive oil and fresh, fragrant basil that I only do wish there would have been more of.

The entrée course allowed me to savor two marvelous mains. The first was Chicken Pesto, comprised of Gigli (Campanelle bellflower-shaped) pasta cooked al dente with just the right amount of bite, tossed with garlic, basil, and topped with toasted pine nuts and crispy capers. The second dish was the Diver Scallops—three well-seasoned and seared, medium rare-cooked morsels served

alongside a rich and creamy parmesan risotto, roasted butternut squash, Brussels, and topped with crispy shallot and pancetta that added both savory and texture notes.

Dessert was an emotional experience all its own, as the Hazelnut Torta was dripping in Nutella cream and salted caramel gelato with buttery hazelnut toffee chunks sprinkled all about. Enough said.

While not included in my recent repertoire, North Italia does have a signature dish. In an exclusive interview I conducted with Fox, he revealed that, while the eatery is best known for its pizza and pastas (with dough and pastas made by hand daily), the braised beef short rib with daily roasted root vegetables and creamy white polenta; and the Burrata Tortelloni with roasted mushroom, Swiss chard, porcini brodo, pecorino and saba are hallmark dishes for the burgeoning brand. As for Fox's personal favorite menu item, that honor goes to the White Truffle Garlic Bread with house made ricotta, mozzarella, grana Padano, and herbs.

Given its explosive growth of late, I asked Fox how North Italia can elevate its image even further. "Every restaurant should tell a story," he said. "The vision is for North to be more than just an Italian restaurant—it's more about creating a place, an experience that reflects life. When thinking about our guests and what is important to them in life, our team is able to deliver an authentic sense of food culture and the restaurant becomes a true part of the community."

Quite a salient perspective that clearly comes from well-honed experience. Fox's come quite a long way from a career that started by packing a punch—literally. I'm told that, upon using his college tuition to open his first restaurant at 20 years-old, Fox was forced to learn how to cook when he got into a fight with his chef, and the chef broke his hand. An oddly fortuitous event considering Fox has since opened 80-plus restaurants throughout his career, with his Fox Restaurant Concepts currently employing nearly 4,000 people across six states—and with plans for continued significant growth in years to come.

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## ABOUT AUTHOR

As the Executive Editor and Producer of "The Luxe List," Merilee Kern is an internationally-regarded consumer product trends expert and hospitality industry voice of authority—a travel, dining, leisure, and lifestyle expert who spotlights noteworthy marketplace innovations, change makers, movers and shakers. She reports on exemplary travel destinations and experiences, extraordinary events and newsworthy products and services across all categories. Reach her online at [www.TheLuxeList.com](http://www.TheLuxeList.com), on Twitter at [www.Twitter.com/LuxeListEditor](https://twitter.com/LuxeListEditor), on Facebook at [www.Facebook.com/TheLuxeList](https://www.Facebook.com/TheLuxeList) and on Instagram at [www.Instagram.com/LuxeListReviews](https://www.Instagram.com/LuxeListReviews).

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