



San Diego Westways

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THE MAGAZINE FOR AUTO CLUB MEMBERS



Wild Alaska

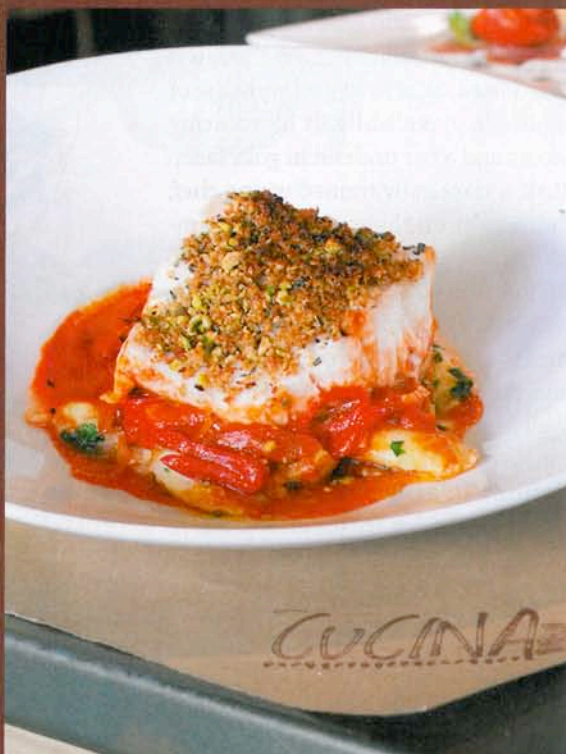
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(Clockwise from top left) At San Diego hot spot Cucina Urbana, a “graffiti wall” gets guests talking. Menu conversation starters include pistachio-and-caper-crusted black cod, caprese salad with prosciutto and arugula, and roasted strawberry fregolata.

Cucina Urbana

505 Laurel Street, San Diego
(619) 239-2222; sdurbankitchen.com

SETTING:

Whimsical “recycled chic” fixtures and a “graffiti wall”

SERVICE:

Informal and friendly, but quite professional

BEST DISHES:

Fried squash blossoms; *burrata* and prosciutto *caprese*; veal *piccata*

DINNER PRICES:

Starters, \$2.75–\$19
entrées, \$12–\$20
desserts, \$7.50–\$9

Located near Balboa Park, the new Cucina Urbana has already become quite the San Diego hot spot. The name translates as “urban kitchen” and indicates Italian inclinations, which are realized both by the cuisine and by the novel and amusing decor. Chef Joe Magnanelli pairs his own creations with intelligent updates of favorites, such as linguine with clam sauce, pizza (one boasts egg, potato, and white sauce), and a fragrant grilled romaine Caesar salad.

Since its June 2009 opening, Cucina Urbana’s unique look has made it a lively part of the city scene. The clever, busy design leads the eye around the spacious room. Past the cocktail bar, flames leaping in the oven of the pizza bar illuminate patrons seated on high stools, as well as an adjacent wine nook in which guests buy bottles at retail and pay a \$7 corkage fee. Next attraction: an imaginative “graffiti wall”

decorated with incoherent squiggles and Italian mottoes.

All this emphasis on surface might make the food seem beside the point, but much talent was invested in perfecting appetizers like the fried squash blossoms, filled with gossamer-light herbed ricotta and dipped in a fragile batter. Prosciutto and arugula elegantly enrich the luscious *caprese* salad of ripe heirloom tomatoes and melting *burrata* cheese. Among the more clever innovations are nightly polenta boards, or hollowed mounds of creamy-firm polenta filled with a savory stew. The bolognese sauce served over rigatoni is one of San Diego’s best, thanks in part to the refreshing addition of fresh ricotta. And on a relatively short entrée list that includes pistachio-and-caper-crusted braised black cod and grilled skirt steak with red onion jam, the veal *piccata* in an oyster mushroom sauce is a brilliant arrangement of flavors. Conclude with a bittersweet chocolate *budino* (pudding) or the *fregolata*, a pastry tart filled with roasted strawberries, and call it an evening well spent.

—David Nelson