

A Bite of Boa at Caffè Boa

Written by Written by Melissa Larsen / Photographed by Jackie Mercandetti
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Caffè Boa has long been a favorite dining destination for the Tempe crowd. Now, the 17-year-old restaurant has a stylish baby sibling, Caffè Boa Bistro, making delicious waves in East Mesa.



Since 1994, a favorite stop along Mill Avenue for college students looking for a great date spot and foodies wanting top-tier eats has been Caffè Boa. The restaurant was opened by Jay and Christine Wisniewski and offers a menu of fresh and seasonal fare and a wine list that'll wow any connoisseur (more than 50 varieties by the glass are available).

In late 2009, former *Digestif* chef Payton Curry came on board as Caffè Boa's culinary mastermind. Now, Curry is the man of the kitchen at the Tempe outpost as well as the new Caffè Boa Bistro, which opened in Mesa's ritzy Las Sendas neighborhood earlier this year. At the East Valley spot, Chef Curry is usually the first person a guest will see upon entering as he operates the wood-burning oven in the exhibition-style kitchen.

Where Caffè Boa is welcoming, warm and like an extension of your own home, the bistro is stylish and contemporary, with its back-lit bar, giant glass-enclosed wine cellar and New York-style along-the-wall seating. However, both feasting spots have stellar fall-friendly patios for alfresco dining and pleasant touches that guests can appreciate, like delightfully scented springs of rosemary that are tied to the cloth napkins with twine. Both locations also dish up a similar menu of incredibly tasty and thoughtful plates. (Both Boas offer most of the same dishes, though Chef Curry is willing to whip up just about anything you're craving—on or off the menu.)

For starters, the fries, the Washington mussels and the pulled-to-order mozzarella are wonderfully warming and delicious. The fries, which are served with a spicy aioli, a mustard that highlights honey from McClendon Farms, and a secret sauce (which Chef Curry calls his "Big Mac sauce"), are crispy and downright addicting. It's also impossible to get enough of the mussels, which are freshened up with campari tomatoes, tarragon and lime zest; a mussel-opposed dining companion couldn't stop cracking open the flavorful shells. And the warm mozzarella had us believing that the cheese course shouldn't have to wait until after dinner to see the light of day. The amazing mozzarella doesn't even need the accompanying basil, peperonata and crostini to dress it up.

As scrumptious as those starters are, the table favorite was the shrimp *adriatico*. The sauce of white wine, garlic, parsley and crushed tomatoes could be one of the Valley's most divine tomato soups, but the addition of shrimp and grilled flatbread makes it even more mouthwatering. (Ask for more flatbread; there's no way you'll want to waste even a drop of tangy, sweet tomato sauce).



Pasta is a big deal at the sister properties as more than half of the entree menu at each restaurant is dedicated to it. There's just about any variety that you might have a hankering for: gnocchi, penne, fettuccini, linguini, spaghetti, agnolotti and more. Two don't-miss dishes in the bunch are the spaghetti and meatballs and the toasted gnocchi. We were smitten with the spaghetti and house-made meatballs from the first bite. Though such a dish can be too traditional—and thus boring—Curry's version is jazzed up just enough with cremini mushrooms and a memorable marina sauce. The gnocchi is finished with brown butter, fava beans, lemon, gremolata and a fried egg. Though we love our pasta with a dash of decadence, this one offers quite a bit of it, making it a dish that is best to be shared. (It is a bit rich to eat solo.)

Yet another reason to share a pasta plate is to leave room for one of Caffè Boa or Boa Bistro's hearty entrees. The diver scallops are uniquely paired with a mixture of chorizo, squash, fingerling potatoes, cilantro, grilled lime vinaigrette and peperonata—unlike any scallop presentation we've seen before. Though scallop dishes tend to be rather minimalist, we appreciate the filling and delicious mix of meat, veggies and potato that partners with this one. The braised veal *osso bucco* is another satisfying standout, though it was the little things that really stood out about this dish (i.e., the crostini slathered in luxuriant pine nut butter).

Curry, however, really makes his menu mark with the Payt-N-Bake fried chicken, which was created after a challenge was posed by one of his staff members. Curry proved that he was up to the task with this incredibly moist and flavorful free-range chicken, which takes 10 days to prepare. While the skin is usually the star of most fried chicken dishes, the actual meat shines with this selection. Thankfully, the Boas are far from stingy with their Payt-N-Bake serving size.

Before heading home, there is one last order of business: Caffè Boa's A-plus Valrhona chocolate cake with chocolate fleur de sel buttercream. Try it—with a glass of milk—and thank us later.

To Learn More:

Caffè Boa www.cafeboa.com.

Caffè Boa Bistro www.boabistro.com.