

Mercato

61 E. Market St., Red Hook

RestaurantSpotlight

Mercato offers an authentic taste of Italy

By Daniel Mochon
For the Poughkeepsie Journal



Lee Ferris/Poughkeepsie Journal

Mercato is in a renovated building on East Market Street in Red Hook, the former site of Luna 61.

Not that I don't enjoy a good chicken parm now and then, but often I find myself craving authentic Italian food — those simple yet hauntingly memorable meals one stumbles into while touring around the Old Country. Italian-American places abound in the Hudson Valley, but there are only a handful of eateries that dish up true Italian cucina — one of these is a recent discovery, Red Hook's Mercato.

Chef/Owner Francesco Buitoni is a seventh-generation scion of the family whose pasta became an American household name. He fell in love with Dutchess County while working at Tivoli's defunct Stoney Creek restaurant and after meeting his future wife and partner, Michele Platt. The couple ran a panini shop for a couple of years at the Red Hook Inn until their lease ran out. In December 2006, Buitoni and Platt opened Mercato in the space formerly occupied by vegetarian eatery Luna 61.

Platt, along with architect David Borenstein, designed the neat interiors, with lemon-colored walls juxtaposed against bright white trim. Wonderful smells emanate from an open kitchen and waft through two airy dining rooms, imbuing the place with a seductive incense and cheerful ambience. Dozens of wine bottles are displayed above a marble-topped bar that seems more suited for eating than imbibing.

Many wines on list

Stints with a Manhattan boutique wine wholesaler and sommelier at Mario Batali's Otto provided Buitoni the savvy to assemble an excellent wine list. The 50 or so wines (\$23-\$139) offer a nice cross section of Italy's diverse grape varietals and viticultural regions, most at approachable prices. About a dozen of the bottles are also available by the glass (\$7-\$13), alongside a trio of Italian bottled beers (all \$4.75) and a few high-end soft drinks (\$2-\$3).

Our bottle of Umani Ronchi Verdicchio '06 (\$24), a crisp white from the Marches region, was a delightful quaff, offering citrus-mineral notes that harmonized beautifully with our food choices. I was thrilled to see Lurisia sparkling water (\$2.75-\$5.75) on the bevande list — this is my favorite acqua minerale and is rarely encountered in our area nowadays.

A tart lemon emulsion brought

Mercato



61 E. Market St., Red Hook; **845-758-5879**; home-cooked market Italian cuisine. Open Wednesday-Thursday, 5-9:30 p.m.; Friday-Saturday, 5-10 p.m.; Sunday, 5-9 p.m.; closed Monday-Tuesday; hours will expand in warmer weather, call beforehand; handicapped accessible via ramp at rear entrance; reservations strongly suggested; American Express, Visa and MasterCard accepted; on- and off-premises catering available; at least one vegetarian entrée daily; others can be adapted; vegans can be accommodated; children are happily accommodated.

Entrée price range: \$13-\$24.

Directions: From Poughkeepsie, take Route 9 north for about 19 miles. When you reach the stoplight at the main intersection in Red Hook, make a right onto East Market Street. Mercato is a few hundred feet down on the left side of the street. Parking is on the street and in a few spots at the rear of the restaurant.

Rating breakdown

Food.....	★★★★½	Service.....	★★★★½
Ambience.....	★★★★☆	Value.....	★★★★☆

together a simple yet toothsome composition of organic baby spinach, mandolined baby artichokes, shaved pecorino and grilled Gulf shrimp (\$10). The latter were lightly dusted with breadcrumbs,

locking in their sweet richness, while the thin cross sections of artichoke offered delicate vegetal notes that contrasted nicely with the nutty sharpness of the Romano. Not only did the elements of this salad offer vibrant flavors, but they played against each other nicely, with the zesty purity of the citrus dressing acting as a unifying theme.

Buitoni's handmade Ricotta & Spinach Ravioli (\$9) were out of this world — absolutely perfect pillows of pasta lolling in sage-scented brown butter. Free-range eggs and soft, 00 flour endowed these with rich skins that were impossibly al dente yet tender at the same time. And the filling was just as masterful, a blend of Old Chatham sheep's and hand-packed cow's milk ricotta, sautéed baby spinach, nutmeg plus a touch of truffle oil. Those of you who don't travel or have an Italian nonna owe it to yourselves to become addicted to this noble example of the pasta-maker's art.

Venetians like their risotto

Please see **Italy**, 14

What ratings mean

★ — poor ★★ — fair ★★★ — good ★★★★ — very good ★★★★★ — excellent

Italy: Short list of desserts is scratch-made daily

Continued from 13

all'onda or "wavy," with discrete, al dente grains and a loose, somewhat soupy consistency. This was how our Slow-Cooked Arborio with Cuttlefish Ink (\$18) arrived, the obsidian-tinted caldera of risotto encircling a crimson mound of supple baby calamari in a slightly spicy tomato-based sauce. Besides providing a beautiful jet-black hue, the cuttlefish ink added a subtle briny flavor and clingy, creamy mouthfeel that enhanced the dish's richness — yet another triumph!

Grilled Lamb Loin Chops (\$21) are like petite, ovine porterhouse steaks with two tender "eye" sections of meat on both sides of a triangular chine bone. My three

chops were cooked just a shade past the requested medium, but had a lovely char flavor nuanced by an olive oil, rosemary and garlic marinade. The still-juicy lamb was served with creamy white heirloom flageolet beans in a rich chicken and meat-enriched brodo along with some crunchy torn sections of sautéed escarole.

Like the dinner menu, the dessert list is short so that everything can be scratch-made daily. Even though the marsala-soaked raisins in my wedge of Ricotta Cheesecake (\$6) were apparently AWOL, it still had a terrific taste and extra-fluffy, cloud-like texture above its firm pasta frol-la butter crust. This, too, was made with a combination of sheep's and

cow's ricottas.

Francesco's Tiramisu (\$6) was a generous square of the classic dolce with two espresso-soaked layers of ladyfingers sequestered inside a not-too-sweet mascarpone mousse, topped with chunky bittersweet Belgian chocolate. Rather than an overly firm commercial version, this reminded me of the softer, creamier renditions typically made at home — the only thing I missed was a drop of brandy or rum.

The service staff's affable, easy-going manner paralleled that of the owner, who only seemed intense when he was behind the stove. Sometimes the pace was a little leisurely, but we never lacked for anything, including friendly attention. The service was casual, but also detail-oriented and teamwork was excellent.

Mercato reminded me of a titillating meal I once enjoyed in a Piedmontese town called Bra, where the philosophy behind Italian cuisine

clicked into place for me. Instead of a symphony of flavors, true Italian cucina is more like a string quartet where each of the players is a virtuoso in his or her own right — Buitoni's simple fare proves that sometimes less is more.

The Poughkeepsie Journal pays for the meals that are the subjects of restaurant reviews and reviewers do not identify themselves prior to the end of the meal.

Daniel Mochon graduated in 2000 with high honors from the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park. He is the director of wine and cuisine at the Hudson Valley's largest wine and spirits store.

OVERDUE FOR BAR-B-Q?

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