

Taste Test: Crudo Café

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Small plates and big flavor are on the menu at one of Old Town's newest dining destinations, Crudo Café.



A fab four has come together in Old Town Scottsdale. Chef-owners Cullen Campbell (Fine's Cellar) and Brandon Crouser (Atlas Bistro) have teamed with Lisa Giungo, formerly of Lisa G's in Phoenix, and pastry chef extraordinaire Tracy Dempsey to create Crudo Café. Though the eatery is easy to miss, as it's located inside Steven Paul Boutique in Scottsdale's Marshall Way Arts District, that doesn't mean it should be.

At this tucked-away spot, you will find mostly fresh and local ingredients, served small plate-style, with an Italian slant. Though it is a bit odd to see a bar, a kitchen area and a few tables sprinkled beside a women's retail area (the salon is towards the back of the space), you'll want to sit outside anyways. The small alfresco area puts you alongside Marshall Way, a perfect spot for First Thursday people-watching. Two large trees canopy the area and are draped with twinkle lights—making the setting quite romantic though laid-back. (We recommend an intimate high-top table if you're on a date and grabbing a round table for a relaxed night out with friends.) To top off the casual and cozy atmosphere, your ears are treated to big band and Rat Pack-style tunes.

But before those twinkle lights are turned on, Crudo dishes up tasty breakfast and lunch offerings. For the most important meal of the day, you'll find breakfast burritos with green chilies and bacon and crepes with ricotta and apple butter. If it's a mid-day meal you're seeking, sandwiches, salads, soups and flatbread pizzas are on deck. Among the lunchtime offerings you'll find a beet soup with mozzarella and basil balsamic, a red pepper-pesto flatbread pizza and an Atomic Coffee milkshake.

When it comes to dinner at Crudo, things get a little more adventurous, especially for the meat-and-potato types. The small—and ever-changing—menu is divided into two sections (raw, seafood- and veggie-focused plates and Italian-inspired pasta and meat dishes). Because the servings are small, it's best to order three or four courses per person, starting with the cold dishes. For starters, we tried the Maya's Farm table crudo, a colorful salad with beets, carrots, micro-arugula, black garlic and a white vinaigrette. While the salad was simple and scrumptious, the tuna dish was our favorite. The dish featured an unexpected combination of oranges, basil and olives alongside the tuna, and was topped with a drizzle of olive oil. We were pleasantly surprised at how mmm-inducing the mixture was: the sweet citrus, the salty olives and the rich, smooth tuna. We definitely hope to see this on the menu again.

Moving on to the warm dishes, we very much enjoyed the soft polenta with fegato grasso and medjool dates. The dates provided a little bit of sweetness and a firmer texture than the polenta and creamy fetago grasso. The gnocchi was among the tastiest that we've tried and was paired with prosciutto, broth and locally sourced herbs. We were less impressed with the risotto. While the actual pasta was wonderful, the cockscomb and mushrooms that paired with it were a tad too chewy for our taste. We rebounded, though, with the daily special of melt-in-your-mouth pork belly served with tangy apple butter. Once you try this dish, you won't be able to do boring old pork chops and apple sauce again.

The best thing about having a dinner of smaller portions is that there's always room for dessert. And just like she did as the pastry chef at Cowboy Ciao and Kazimierz World Wine Bar, Dempsey delivers unique and delicious after-dinner eats at Crudo. The dessert menu typically features four options, and we were tempted by Dempsey's apple-bacon galette. Though we found the pecan pastry to be too dry, everything else about the dish was a total treat: the warm apple, the bacon chunks and the apple cider-caramel ice cream. To top it off was a drizzle of fleur de sel caramel sauce. We also went for the decadent brownie with espresso-orange ice cream and salted chocolate sauce. But the main attraction of this dish was the toasted espresso-orange marshmallows. Even as summer approaches, Dempsey's out-of-this-world 'mallows had us craving some hot cocoa to dunk them in.

Crudo Café
7045 E. Third Ave., Scottsdale (inside Steven Paul Boutique).
480.603.1011, www.crudoaz.com.
Chefs: Cullen Campbell and Brandon Crouser.
Hours: Tuesday, 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., Wednesday - Saturday, 8 a.m. to 10 p.m.