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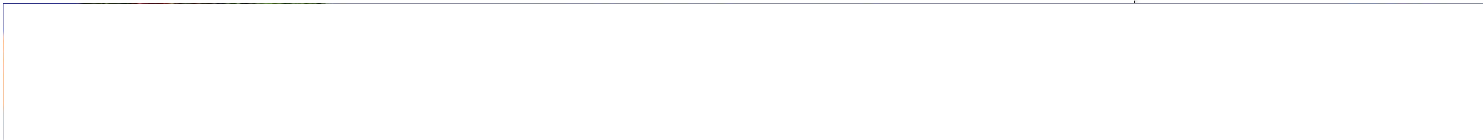
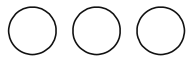
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Restaurant review: Taverna Novo in Saratoga

Italian mainstay dishes meet trends — charcoal, anyone? — with pleasing results at Taverna Novo

Susie Davidson Powell

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Risotto with lobster and shrimp at Taverna Novo on Beekman Street Wednesday May 9, Springs, NY. (John Carl D'Annibale/Times Union)

John Carl D'Annibale

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Taverna Novo is unrecognizable from its earlier life as 62 Beekman or, before that, Beekman Street Bistro. An Italian restaurant with pizza at its core, it's the newest addition to the leafy, walkable Beekman Street Arts District on Saratoga Springs' west side, where ultra-casual eateries are flourishing among artist galleries and boutiques operating out of period homes.

It's the second act for owners Patricia and Jeffrey Novo, widely known as former owners of the Saratoga wine shop Crush & Cask. While Patti, a Certified Specialist of Wine, is a graduate of the culinary program at Schenectady County Community College, where she now teaches wine courses, their lack of prior restaurant experience rang alarms. They were taking on a diminutive space where others have closed. And they were promising pizza in an era of pizza worship, when dough and crust can make or break a business (restaurateur David Chang dedicated an entire episode of his Netflix series, "Ugly Delicious," to it), and early media reports indicated they did not have a chef.

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Taverna Novo

62 Beekman St., Saratoga Springs

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Fortunately, the Novos turned the space on its head. The bar has been sensibly brought forward to a more welcoming position on one side, with European woven bar stools and four overhead televisions screening sports, of obvious benefit to the solo diners who wander in like locals to a pub. Canopied patio dining, planned for summer but awaiting permits, will occupy the side driveway of the former house.

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The restaurant rear is dominated by the huge gleaming copper body of a Le Panyol wood-fired oven, the Rolls-Royce of pizza ovens, lined with heat-trapping terre blanche bricks imported from France. The investment took three days to assemble and requires all-day babying to keep its Hadean depths at the terrifying 900 degrees that can cook pizzas in 60 to 90 seconds. As the kitchen's primary cooking source, more than 80 percent of the menu passes through it at some point.

To this copper behemoth and Patti's wine knowledge cleverly laid out in a fun-to-read, fairly priced wine list, add Fabrizio Facchini, the Novos' slim, energetic chef, who darts out to cast his eye over the room and catch 10 seconds of a game. A fast-talking Italian from Marche on the Adriatic, Facchini is a member of Italy's Slow Food Chefs' Alliance and, with his wife, is the former owner of Antico Borgo, an award-winning restaurant and boutique hotel.

He is passionate about authenticity, insisting on low-acid San Marzano tomatoes for the Neapolitan pizzas and quality ingredients imported from Italy, including a cousin's cheese and bright green pistachios from Sicily that were held up in customs. He name-drops connections with Eataly, his friend Massimo Bottura's Food for Soul advocacy organization and perhaps a television project in California. Through him, Taverna Novo secured a recent invitation to cook at James Beard House on Monday, a strikingly ambitious move for a fledgling restaurant and a gutsy way of putting a casual, upstate Italian taverna on the track crowd's radar.

It's no surprise that stints with Mazzone Hospitality and at MezzaNotte in Guilderland were brief. Facchini, a principled chef who has opened restaurants in Italy and San Diego, does not seem like someone who wants a boss. But he is complimentary of the Novos and their collaboration on the menu, even when it involves a squarely American Kentucky Derby pizza special.

Like other standard-bearers, Facchini takes his Neapolitan pizza seriously, while bringing in Italy's charcoal-crust trend. You can't have escaped the activated-charcoal ice cream and black burger buns on social media, or knowing charcoal pizza is now a thing. It doesn't taste different, but for \$2 extra, the blue-black crust will elevate your Instagram feed. A 36-hour fermentation gives his dough impressive elasticity and flavor; pizzas arrive piping hot, bronzed but barely blistered, milky mozzarella melted and excess moisture evaporated by heat. We leave Margherita for a future visit and Utica tomato pie to other critics, finally choosing "the Happy Bastard" with fragrant Italian sausage and thinly sliced fennel.

Front of house is wonderfully hospitable. It makes perfect sense to find a popular, larger-than-life waiter from Lombardo's in Albany moving deftly among close tables. When my guests order as if they mean business, two tables are spun together. It's warm inside, with balmy evening air pressing through the open door and the huffing oven behind us. Tiny potted rosemary plants, olive oil and vinegar are in place for the house-made focaccia and dramatically marbled, activated-charcoal bread. Restricting ourselves to Patti's unique Italian varietals, we snap up a minerally, dry vernaccia (Tenuta le Calcinae, 2016) at a wallet-friendly

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Dinner feels properly Italian: a flurry of plates passed family-style, libations and noisy table talk. Spuntini (shareable small bites) reappear as primi or secondi for hungrier appetites. In its smallest version, Spanish octopus grilled in the wood fire is a section of tentacle, its center snow-white and tender, balanced on cannellini beans brightened with garlic, olive oil and softened lemon. Flowering herbs on every dish boost tart, spicy and mustard notes.

We scrape stracciatella spilling from the burrata alla Facchini. Scattered in pea-shoot pesto and crushed Sicilian pistachios that are moist and sweet, cool young pea shoots contrast against wizened tomatoes sweetly concentrated by fire. There's another burrata dish named after the Novos, but order this one for a near religious experience.

I'm happy Facchini channels family. Fire-browned meatballs in a rich San Marzano tomato sauce are hidden under downy, aged Parmesan. Their blend of pork, veal, beef and lamb is in the lasagna della nonna, a distinct Northern-style lasagna with creamy bechamel and a stellar flamed-cheese skin. I know better than to pick a fight over an Italian nonna's recipe, but we found this too plain. And while Facchini is generous with lobster and shrimp in a saffron risotto stirred through with salsa verde, I'd be floored if the shellfish was truly never frozen. But, the porchetta is everything — fatty and fragrant, with a crackling rind. Roast potatoes and garlic cloves laced with olive oil, rosemary and salt are chewy and smoky from two encounters with fire; greens and beans are no joke, served in a feisty knot of lemony chard and pepper heat.

While bankable names are grafted onto Broadway restaurants in time for spendy summer madness, stroll west to the arts district, where a little Italian taverna might be the season's upset.

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