

# CHICAGO



EAT

## CREATING CHITALIANO

Formento's reinvents the Rat Pack red-sauce joint.

BY MICHAEL NAGRANT

Formento's, 925 W. Randolph St., Chicago  
312-690-7295 // formentos.com

The red-sauce joints Frank Sinatra once haunted have had their day. The banquettes have weathered and torn; the Sunday gravy has thickened to a cloying glop. All that's left in so many of these family-style spots is dusty nostalgia. B. Hospitality Co., the group behind hip Wicker Park spot The Bristol and Lincoln Park's modern rustic Italian spot Balena, saw this and set out to reinvent red-sauce Italian, to create a temple befitting not only Sinatra but also new-generation crooners like Harry Connick Jr. and Michael Bublé.

Formento's on Randolph Street's Restaurant Row is brawny, clubby and modern. Booths are burnished with a mahogany luster, and the constellation-style red dome lights look like something out of an Alessi boutique. These elements are tempered with a touch of the past: impeccable deferent service and a bowl of alabaster fruit channeling a similar one once found in the living room of Nonna Formento, B. Hospitality partner John Ross's grandmother and the restaurant's namesake.

In the kitchen, executive chef and partner Tony Quartaro draws upon his own grandmother's cooking, adding modern technique honed at San Francisco's A16 and at The Bristol. Chicken Parmesan has been shaken from its stereotypical perch and given a matzo-meal crust that lifts the whole dish with an airy crunch. It is served on the bone and sauced with a marinara that tastes of freshly picked tomato.

*Giardiniera*, that mushy blend of oil-soaked vegetables found at every corner Italian beef shack, is perked up with fresh, crisp florets of cauliflower, curls of carrot and slivers of Calabrian chili splashed with bright vinegar and served as an amuse-bouche alongside pillowy, house-baked focaccia. Chicken Vesuvio, an Italian-American invention that's usually a soggy mess of potatoes, peas and dry chicken, is reincarnated at Formento's as an impeccable roasted whole bird with a side of super-crisp wedge fries.

Whether Sinatra would like this kind of newfangled Italian spot we'll never know, but we do know this: One bite of the *canestri* — house-extruded, elbow-shaped tubes served with a side of silky Sunday gravy made of simmered pork neck bones and infused with braised pancetta — most certainly will fly you to the moon.

SHOP

## A SHOO-IN

Old-world craftsmanship meets contemporary design at Mezlan.

BY AMBER GIBSON

Mezlan, 900 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago  
312-962-8871 // mezlanchicago.com

Mezlan began in 1985 as a wholesale and private-label brand of handcrafted Spanish dress shoes for department stores like Nordstrom and Saks Fifth Avenue. Thirty years later, designer Antonio Sanchez is striking out with his own brand and expanding into socks, belts, shirts and jackets to complete a man's wardrobe.

Wares from both Mezlan and its more youthful counterpart, Bacco Bucci, are still made in Spain and Italy using a range of materials, from exotic ostrich and crocodile to more conservative suede and supple calfskin. It takes 100 pairs of artisan hands to ensure the hallmark durability, comfort and quality of each shoe.

In 2008, Mezlan opened its first branded shop in Las Vegas's Shoppes at the Palazzo; today, there are six stores nationwide. Perhaps the most prestigious is the 900 North Michigan outpost, where associates have been selling the brand's goods for more than two decades and have an intricate understanding of shoemaking and fit. On Fridays, the shop even offers complimentary shoe-shining services, creating an in-store experience that keeps customers coming back.



SLEEP

## MODERN ART DECO

British swagger hits the Loop.

BY AMBER GIBSON

Virgin Hotels Chicago, 203 N. Wabash Ave., Chicago  
855-946-6600 // virginhotels.com

The Old Dearborn Bank Building has undergone a cheeky British makeover for the worldwide debut of Virgin Hotels. Visitors and locals alike will enjoy working, relaxing and socializing at the second-floor Commons Club — or the spa and rooftop lounge scheduled to open this summer.

The real highlight of the 250-room property is the truly novel design marrying function and style. Each guest chamber has sleeping quarters and a spacious dressing room. The latter is a multifunctional bathroom, closet and hallway hybrid. A thick privacy door slides open to the sleeping chamber, where an ergonomic bed does triple duty as a couch and a workspace. The leather headboard offers sturdy back support, and a chair back even emerges from the foot of the bed.

Guest rooms are decorated in neutral tones with pops of Virgin's signature red, from the entry door to the well-stocked Smeg mini fridge. And don't miss out on the personalized welcome treats, complimentary happy-hour drinks and sporty red Tesla house car that will take you anywhere within a two-mile radius.

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