

Relish review – wood and slow Jamie First

Melburnians love their wood-fired ovens and the people who know how to drive them – and Leandro Panza is a master.

Artusi's oven takes pride of place in the kitchen of the elegant Southbank restaurant, but this place is not about pizza.

The oven gives the food - from the bread to roast meats and fish - a beautiful earthiness.

Adding to the appeal, many of head chef Panza's dishes are slow-cooked and use organic and heirloom produce.

In fact, slowing things down is a wise move with food and views such as this.

My dining partner and I enjoy 10 courses over more than three hours.

Large checkerboard windows allow the light to stream in, bouncing off the restaurant's dramatic copper panelling.

The design of the upmarket eatery is simple – light and bright, with clean lines and wicker chairs for 150 (up to 50 of those outside).

There are two separate balcony areas, a long, wooden bench top providing bar-style seating alongside the kitchen and two main dining areas.

A number of elements predominate. Bluestone is immediately apparent in the bar and on countertops, while the floor is oak and the walls are white.

Owners Tamara Volkoff and Luis Pampliega (of Tutto Bene fame) named Artusi after the man considered to be the father of Italian cooking, Pellegrino Artusi.

To kick off the night we are presented with three eggplant parmigiana bites (\$6.50), which are crispy on the outside and soft on the inside, containing two kinds of cheese.

The entree is completed with a sweet and spicy marzano tomato-based dipping sauce.

Quail (\$9.50) with a caramelised skin follows, marinated with grappa, shallots, herbs and chilli that gives the juicy little bird a distinct tang.

A wintry duck gnocchi (\$21 for entree and \$34 for main) with smoked chestnuts and kale is one of the highlights of our cool spring evening.

Light and fluffy, the nuts provide crunch against the melt-in-the-mouth potato and meat.

It is clearly a labour of love for the chef, who says the restaurant goes through nearly 10kg of duck each week just for this dish.

We feast on two of Artusi's daily roasts, suckling pig and goat (market price, \$38-\$44).

Cooked overnight and finished in the wood-fired oven, the pork skin crackles as I bite into it, while the meat is meltingly tender.

The second roast has four elements to it. The goat leg is cooked for 16 hours, the shank and shoulders for 12, the rack for five and the loin and fillet for three.

Basted in thyme, roasted garlic and olive oil, I assure you each painstaking hour is worth it.

Our dessert is an extremely more-ish tiramisu (\$15) served with mascarpone cream, caviar pearls that ooze caffeine goodness and a caramel marsala crisp.

We wash down the fine food with help from a 17-page drinks menu, which includes cocktails, ciders, beer and plenty of wine.

Hours: Noon till 3pm and 5pm till late, 7 days a week

Price: Moderate

Food: Italian with a twist

Vibe: A little bit swanky