

AUTUMN 2018

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LUXURY LIVING DEFINED.

# The Launch Issue!

## A YORKVILLE PIED A TERRE

A CITY GETAWAY  
FOR ALL SEASONS

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# CRITIQUE

• DON ALFONSO 1890 •  
19 TORONTO ST, TORONTO

## THE NEW OUTPOST OF AN ITALIAN MICHELIN-STAR CHEF

MICHELIN HAS THE DISTINCTION of being the most influential restaurant rating system in the world. Originally a promotion by the eponymous French tire company eager to encourage more driving, Michelin began sending anonymous inspectors to evaluate restaurants in 1926. More than 90 years later, a three-star ranking is considered the highest accolade in the business.

Restaurants awarded one star are deemed to be very good in their category; two stars are awarded to restaurants that are “excellent cooking worth a detour,” and the elusive third star is awarded only to those considered “exceptional cuisine worth a special journey.”

The much-lauded guides are also criticized for being limited by geography, focused on only “fancy” restaurants and for being sweet on the French – France has the most Michelin stars in the world. In Canada we have no Michelin-starred restaurants, not because we don’t have talented chefs, the guides don’t operate here (why they don’t is a much longer, divisive conversation).

In a move to bring the quality and status of Michelin to Toronto, Nick Di Donato of Liberty Entertainment Group (Blueblood Steakhouse, Cibo Wine Bar, Spice Route, Casa Loma, Liberty Grand) partnered with Italian Chef Ernesto Iaccarino’s Don Alfonso 1890. Don Alfonso 1890 is a restaurant concept with outposts in Italy, New Zealand and China; and now Toronto.

Aside from global experience as a restaurateur, Chef Iaccarino brings with him his coveted Michelin star – actually, two of them.

Chef Alfonso Iaccarino grew up in Sant’Agata, Italy (near Sorrento) working in his family’s hotel. Hotel Iaccarino was established in 1890 (explaining the restaurant name). He and his wife opened their first restaurant in 1973; after ten years they left the hotel and devoted themselves to the operation of Don Alfonso 1890. In the years since, the restaurant earned a Michelin star, and then another, and then another (it had three stars from 1997 though 2001). Chef Ernesto Iaccarino grew up working in the family restaurant and became chef of Don Alfonso 1890 in 2003. The







Petit Fours



Bison in Rustic Bread Crust

2018 Michelin Guide awarded Don Alfonso 1890 two stars.

For the Toronto outpost, the Liberty Group took the old Consumers Gas building at 19 Toronto Street (built in 1852, also former Rosewater) and turned it into a study in crisp white and shimmering gold, dotted with art. The vision of Liberty Entertainment Group VP and Creative Director, Nadia DiDonato, respect was paid to the building's past with hand-painted cornice moldings and original pillars along with contemporary art and gold-faced accent furniture.

The entrance (held open by the restaurant's valet parking attendants when I arrive) is dominated by a large work by Toronto artist Daniel Mazzone. A gorgeous under-lit onyx bar is to the left, then past the sparkling, open-concept kitchen, the main dining room. This space is dominated by a piece of sculpture (subjectively loved or hated) by renowned artist Philippe Pasqua.

The kitchen may be one of the prettiest I've seen. All white, sparkling, rows of white stone worktops with kitchen staff buzzing at each station, the entire thing open to the dining room save a pane of glass. The kitchen is led by Executive Chef Saverio Macri (Cibo Wine Bar) in partnership, and after training, with Chefs Alfonso and Ernesto Iaccarino.

The menu concept is a chef's tasting of eight courses (\$150), available with an optional sommelier-led wine pairing (\$100). Your only decision is to choose between the Classic and Contemporary Menus. "Contemporary" is code for vegetarian menu, and the restaurant tells me most diners choose the "Classic" menu.

The question could be posed about the eagerness of diners to embrace a set menu, but there is something to be said for removing choice. I always ask what is the best dish that day anyway; what the chef recommends – so why not really relax, and let the kitchen do its work?

The restaurant is light and airy, a pleasure of a space, really. There are plenty of staff on hand – but this could be the result of visiting during early weeks of service.

Seared Muscovy Duck Breast is served with mashed gala apples, baby spinach, a reduction of balsamic vinegar and anise demi-glace. The plate is garnished with pulverized cinnamon and borage. We are instructed that the chef intends for each of the elements on the plate to be mixed and mingled in each bite, so to be sure to combine each of the sauces and garnishes for the intended flavour. The slightly

smoky duck is thinly sliced and rare, wrapped around tender baby spinach. Dutifully I swirl the apple, Balsamic and demi-glace together with the duck. It is indeed a perfect mouthful. It's a searing August day in Toronto, but the plate conjures thoughts of autumn with flavours of apple alongside duck.

From the "Contemporary" menu (also available from the a la carte menu – more on that later), Rigatoni Vesuvius is a study in the colours of the Italian flag. Perfectly al dente rigatoni pasta is plated on end, surrounding fresh peas and ricotta di Bufala, along with an eruption of tomato, basil and Parmesan. The flavours are undeniably fresh and the artistry of the plate is enhanced by the choice of serving dish (black and textured like volcanic rock), another successful design choice by Nadia DiDonato. If you've ever visited the Amalfi Coast, you'll realize this dish is inspired by Chef Iaccarino's home, Mount Vesuvius seen on the horizon across the Gulf of Naples.

The highlight of the meal though, is Bison in Rustic Bread Crust. A Manitoba bison tenderloin, wrapped in delicate layers of Swiss chard and mozzarella inside a bread crust. It is plated with a dollop of zingy tomato sauce, a verdant herbal green sauce and drizzled with demi-glace. Again, we are asked to mix the sauces together to attain the perfect flavour. Tasted individually, the flavours slightly harsh, but combined they sing. The bison is rare, and perfectly tender. I could say it may have been very slightly salty (for my taste), but in a word: delicious.

Upstairs, in the mezzanine, you can order from the a la carte menu, or enjoy the cocktail service from a menu designed by Bar Manager and Mixologist Oliver Stern. If you select a concoction from the "Molecular Menu" you enjoy tableside cocktail service for inventive libations like The Modern Martini Pairing. Enjoy the performance of its creation from the bar cart wheeled to your table, and the martini served on a platter of ice with "caviar" pearls. The mezzanine is a comfortable space with low sofas and some regular seating. On the night I visit, a table of four young men are enjoying the show of their molecular cocktail being prepared tableside. It's an unexpectedly informal interlude of entertainment in what could be a stiff and formal setting.

Downstairs, desserts are presented on a footed plate in a swirl of fog; another amusing touch that makes the meal as memorable as it was tasty. ☐

*\*Our writer has dined at the restaurant anonymously, meals were not subsidized by the establishment.*



Rigatoni Vesuvius



Seared Muscovy Duck Breast