

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

**M**y friend Mohamoud asked me to choose the restaurant. I'm the "famous" food writer, he argued. Ah, but he lives in New York City, and I hadn't been there in years. I didn't really know where to start my research. How could I impress a vegetarian (albeit one who makes an occasional exception for lamb) living in a city that's reputed to have our nation's most sophisticated culinary scene? And then fate arrived in the form an e-mail: Il Mulino New York would soon open in Atlanta. The press release boasted that the original Greenwich Village location has been voted the No. 1 Italian restaurant in New York City for two decades by Zagat's. Eureka! I made reservations for two. I'd experience the original and then later ensure the Atlanta location measured up.

I arrived in New York City the day after the election; the vibe was like a hung-over frat house. People looked exhausted with a hint of lingering elation. Times Square was littered. It was raining. The taxi ride from LaGuardia to my hotel that was supposed to take 20 minutes lasted two hours. I called the restaurant panicked, knowing I'd miss my 7:30 p.m. reservation. Whoever answered the phone said, "No problem. Everyone is running slow."

As it turned out, when the taxi dropped us off on the corner of West Third Street, we were only 15 minutes late. But it took us awhile to locate the restaurant. When I finally noticed "Il Mulino" in script on a pink awning I thought, "That's it? The best Italian restaurant in New York?" The windows were black, the street was empty, and it seemed hard to believe anyone knew about the place. But as soon as we opened the heavy glass doors, a wave of energy rushed out and pulled us in. We checked our trench coats, squeezed past the bar and met the maitre d', who immediately escorted us to a table. A team of servers quickly pounced into action, delivering water, a generous chunk of Parmesan cheese, a platter of micro-thin fried zucchini, a basket of assorted breads and two small plates of bruschetta and mussels. I couldn't help but wonder: Does Il Mulino treat all diners this way, just food writers, or just people who arrived late?

One of our waiters—there were so many of them running around in white tuxedos that it was impressive they didn't knock into each other in that tiny restaurant densely packed with tables—rattled off the daily specials. I asked if it was possible to see a menu. "Of

course," he said, and then fetched them. Truth was, our table was so laden with food I wasn't sure if we were expected to order anything else or if the menu had been pre-determined. Turns out the generous portions we faced only foreshadowed things to come. And once I had a chance to look around, I saw that other diners were treated to the same bounty with which we'd been greeted.

The menu, influenced by the Abruzzo region of Italy, boasts a variety of rustic yet refined dishes. There are familiar favorites like caprese salad, fried calamari, spaghetti carbonara, fettucine alfredo, chicken parmigiana, porcini risotto, ossobuco, scaloppine alla marsala and tiramisu. Specials showcase seasonal fare. Every dish impressed and the service was impeccable. Our meal concluded with complimentary glasses of signature house Grappa. By the time Mohamoud and I rolled out of the place, he'd decided to treat his wife to a meal there. I couldn't wait to try the one in Atlanta.

When my husband Dean and I arrived at the Atlanta location in the 191 Peachtree Tower, we were greeted at the entrance with

KITCHENINSIGHTS

## DINING ESSENTIALS

### IL MULINO NEW YORK

191 Peachtree Street  
404-524-5777  
www.ilmulino.com

**Hours:** Lunch: Mon.–Fri., 11:30 a.m.–2:30 p.m. Dinner: Sun.–Wed. 5–10:30 p.m. and Thu.–Sun. 5–11:30 p.m.

**Reservations:** Recommended

**Dress Code:** Business or downtown chic

**Alcohol:** Full bar

**Cost:** Lunch entrées from \$12; dinner entrées from \$26

**Credit Cards:** All major

**Parking:** Valet

Ossobuco, veal shank roasted in a red wine sauce with porcini mushrooms and served with saffron risotto



PHOTOS/IL MULINO NEW YORK

eager smiles. From that moment on, the dining experience was exactly the same as I'd found in New York—same level of attentive service, same menu, same quality of food (the cannelloni was even better than I'd remembered!), same wine program, same general ambiance. In fact, the menu set by Executive Chef Michele Mazza is the same at all locations—even the daily specials, which to my great fortune on the day that I dined included fabulous to-die-for ravioli with black truffles and creamy champagne sauce.

There is only one unmistakable difference between the New York and Atlanta locations: Elbow room. According to General Manager Othman Belkadi, while the New York restaurant can seat up to 60, Atlanta can seat up to 160. It's not just that there are bigger tables in greater numbers; there's also more space between the tables. It's a welcome change, as neighboring tables feel less intrusive.

Il Mulino New York offers Atlantans an elegant place to indulge in classic Italian food. **SP**



Langostino, Sardinian jumbo prawns sautéed in a white wine and garlic sauce

# DOWN SOUTH

Il Mulino New York arrives in Atlanta



Pappardelle pasta with tomato-basil sauce with onions