DINING SCENE

Four Seasons NOLA's new restaurant has view, revamped brasserie



Ian McNulty
WHAT'S COOKING

The dining room on the fifth floor of the Four Seasons New Orleans hotel was built for the river, angling to follow one of the Mississippi's great curves as it courses past the city.

Now that room is home to a new Italian restaurant called Trattoria Varco, while its predecessor, chef Donald Link's French restaurant Chemin à la Mer, has a new home in the hotel lobby, and a new culinary identity as well.

It's a 2.0 evolution for the Four Seasons' dining options, five years after the luxury hotel transformed the historic World Trade Center building on the downtown riverfront.

Trattoria Varco has been quietly open for about two weeks and held a grand opening Friday, while the revamped Chemin à la Mer opened in its new location earlier this fall and is getting into its groove.

Here's what these two different restaurants are like now.

Varco with the view

The layout at Trattoria Varco remains the same, with a bar and lounge area opening to a long dining room situated to make the most of the river view, and with a curving terrace set with umbrella-topped tables outside.

The name varco, Italian for passage, is a reference to the river. Through the windows, or over the rail of the terrace, there's the capitating view of its course and ships navigating its dramatic turns.

But what had been an oyster bar is now Trattoria Varco's salumi bar, where diners can watch as staff make hand-pulled fresh burrata and build meat boards and crudo plates.

The menu draws from the classic Italian approach of straightforward, ingredient-driven dishes focused on a handful of quality ingredients, directed by Four Seasons chef de cuisine Glen Forman.

Lamb agnolotti and blue crab risotto share the menu with pizza, steak and crudo plates, including one made with yellowfin set off by umami-rich tonnato and fried capers for a salty crunch.



STAFF PHOTOS BY IAN McNULTY

Bombolini, light fried puffs with white chocolate pistachio cream, is served at Trattoria Varco, the riverfront Italian restaurant at the Four Seasons New Orleans hotel.



Boudin and chicken sausage share a plate at Chemin à la Mer, a French-style brasserie within the Four Seasons Hotel in New Orleans.

Spaghetti cacio e pepe is finished with a blend of ground peppers for a burst of flavor over pasta so creamy-rich it sticks to the fork, and the cioppino, a seafood stew, has a mix of fish, shrimp and clams with lumps of local crabmeat in a heady tomato broth.

The desserts, from hotel pastry chef Emily Rosenberg, include bombolini, a fried pastry puff that is like an airy-light doughnut, finished with gingered sugar and a white chocolate pistachio cream.

The lounge, now called Bar Varco, has its own menu with pizzettas, baked provolone, crostini, raw oysters and salumi plates. With Italian-inspired cocktails, the bar, restaurant and terrace are places for an aperitivo, the Italian notion of happy hour with spritz and aperitifs and small plates, with a good long look at that river view.

Trattoria Varco serves dinner Tue.-Sat., 4:30 p.m. to 10 p.m., and serves a separate breakfast menu daily, 6:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Note that the availability of outdoor tables depends on the weather.

TRATTORIA VARCO AND CHEMIN A LA MER

Four Seasons New Orleans hotel
2 Canal St., (504) 434-5100

A new Chemin à la Mer

Chemin à la Mer kept its evocative name, French for "path to the sea," while at the same time trading its view for a new home in one of the most opulent dining room rooms in the city (previously home to Miss River, which closed in August after a five-year run).

It is a good fit for Chemin à la Mer's new identity, changing from what had been essentially a French-inspired steakhouse to a Louisiana brasserie with both French and Creole flavors. It is also now the place for lunch at the Four Seasons (Trattoria Varco doesn't serve lunch).

The restaurant is a central casting stunner for the classic Parisian brasserie, with a blend of Belle Epoque elegance and art deco style. The dining room progresses through a mosaic of marble, antiqued mirror, pearlescent tile and burnished brass. A bank of windows faces the hotel's park-like green space, and details abound across the room.

Brody LeBlanc remains executive restaurant chef, leading the kitchen day to day.

A few of the menu's signatures made the move too. That includes the West Indies crab salad, a fresh treatment of local crab, and the seafood gumbo, from a bayou country tradition thickened with roasted okra rather than roux for a depth of flavor with a lighter heft.

The wedge salad is a more refined version of the steakhouse standard with a rich blue cheese dressing and smoky squiggles of thick-cut bacon from the Link Restaurant Group's larder at Cochon Butcher.

The fish of the day (drum when I tried it) is a thick flank with a perfectly bronzed sear and a trickle of spice that tastes somewhere between Jamaican jerk and Louisiana Creole. The rice dressing beneath is like a dirty rice, lightened up with eggplant replacing the meat and liver.

The hanger steak is topped with a disk of butter bigger than a poker chip — which may seem excessive, but only until it melts into the slices, painting the beef with an herbal richness.

There's a burger, of course, because this is a hotel restaurant in service to travelers, but it's not perfunctory. A middleweight addition, the burger is juicy and balanced with Comté cheese. Add a pickle to mine, please, and pass me the mustard for a little acidic contrast.

For dessert, again from Rosenberg's pastry kitchen, try the coconut tart, a dreamboat of meringue traced with torch marks.

After dinner, get another drink to soak up the surroundings a bit more. At lunch, do the same over a latte. Then again, it's New Orleans, so if the afternoon is going your way, get a post-lunch cocktail instead and sink into the gilded surroundings. This is a room that rewards lingering with its luxurious ambiance.

Chemin à la Mer serves lunch and dinner from 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. daily and a jazz brunch from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Saturday and Sunday.

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