

DINING
primo pasta

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Italico, an upscale Italian restaurant and wine bar on Palo Alto's California Avenue, is priming for a bustling Friday night. Owner Maico Campilongo watches his servers pull chairs off tables, prep the patio space and generally help the ristorante unfold. "It's like a flower opening," he observes.

Tonight, Maico is joined by Michael Oliverio, tallying two of iTalico's five founders. The group also includes Maico's brother Franco Campilongo, his cousin Giuseppe

Errico and chef Kristjan D'Angelo. "We all have a great passion for food, wine and the hospitality business—and never stop learning from each other!" Michael says. "Michael is basically the face of this restaurant—he brought in his beautiful energy," credits Maico, who oversees customer service and public relations. Maico also keeps busy running Terún Pizzeria, a more casual spot

only a block away (also with Franco and Kristjan).

When describing their partner dynamic, Maico chuckles and pulls out another metaphor: "Business is like marriage." The recipe for a successful union? In this case, 15-plus years of friendship. "We were able to create an atmosphere in the restaurant for our employees and customers that feels like home," explains Michael.

Whereas Terún zips along at a fast pace, iTalico's sit-down concept invites a more indulgent tempo. "People take their time

ABOVE (left to right): iTalico founders Maico Campilongo, Executive Chef Kristjan D'Angelo and Michael Oliverio.



here—enjoy an extra bottle of wine, mingle more,” Michael describes. “It gives us the chance to get to know our customers better.” iTalico’s “wine cellar chic” interior also invites a relaxed pace with cozy, low lighting and plenty of wood accents that invoke oak barrels. A guitar in the corner ensures that guests (or Maico) brighten the space with live music almost nightly. (Fun fact: Those strings have even been strummed by a famous basketball player).

iTalico also boasts a sought-after private room. “We said no to Elon

Musk,” chuckles Maico. “He asked for this room, but it didn’t happen because we were booked that night.” Steph Curry, on the other hand, did make it through the door.

Of course, the meal must meet the expectations set by the space—and iTalico delivers with prestigious Michelin Bib Gourmand distinction. To start the meal right, try the frittelle: fluffy fried pizza dough layered with salty prosciutto and topped with a



generous dollop of melt-in-your-mouth burrata. Pasta lovers are sure to fall for iTalico’s pillowy ravioli stuffed with spinach and ricotta... That, or the heartier paccheri, which blankets thick, tube-shaped pasta and chunks of braised ribeye with a rich tomato sauce and grated flakes of Grana Padano.

Initially, the owners concentrated on pasta (“Al dente, the traditional way, the way we enjoy,” Maico specifies.) as well as other stand-out Italian entrees and an award-winning wine list. Not wanting to encroach on Terún, pizza wasn’t part of the plan—but iTalico later added everyone’s favorite slice-shaped comfort food and gave it their own spin. “Here, it’s 80%



whole wheat flour," clarifies Maico of iTalico's airy light crust. At Terún, it's strictly double zero flour—a requirement for any true Neapolitan-style pizza. Terún, is in fact, VPN certified—one of only 11 pizzerias in California to be bestowed the coveted status by the world's leading Neapolitan purists.

These days, iTalico diners devour mortadella pizzas with rovagnati and pistachio ("It reminds me of when I was a kid," Maico says.) or slices of diavola with spicy sausage. Intrepid diners opt for nduja. "You get the spicy and the peppery of the spreadable sausage and the sweetness of the zucchini together, combined with the mozzarella," tempts Michael. "It's really, really tasty."

Though iTalico's founders hail from southern Italy, the restaurant's dishes span regions. "We decided that we had to expand a little bit more and represent more of the whole country," Michael explains. The frittura mista places you in southern Italy, while the osobuco and pollo Milanese draws you north. Then, "The spaghetti di mare brings you back to the Amalfi Coast," he says.

The wine list and its 120+ labels also allow diners to travel by taste from Piemonte to Puglia, Sardinia to Sicily. "Explore this beautiful country," invites Maico. This wide selection earned iTalico *Wine Spectator's* Award of Excellence. Unsure of what to uncork? "I've been in love with amarone," Maico says of a robust northern Italian red that pairs well with meat and tomatoes. There's also a lighter, fruitier

barolla, an excellent companion to fish and that spicy diavola.

To keep their batteries charged, iTalico's owners pursue interests outside the restaurant. Michael races his Ducati in an amateur league (and has even accelerated along the iconic Laguna Seca track)—while Maico, his brother and his cousin take to the road on Ventum bikes. Going a pedal further, Terún sponsors a team of 60 to 70 riders from every category as well as Team TIBCO, an elite women's cycling team that recently competed in the UCI Women's World Tour. "Through cycling, we've been able to go out into society much more," Maico shares. Plus, it burns serious carbs. "That's the whole point: to be able to eat more wonderful food," quips Maico. "More pasta!" Michael chimes in.

When the partners return to the

restaurant, they do so wholeheartedly. "I never feel like I go to work because I enjoy so much what I do," remarks Michael. "I enjoy every single aspect from the moment I walk through the door to the moment I get to the kitchen to see the produce and whatever the chef is preparing for specials to talking to the wine guy and the servers—every aspect makes me happy." Maico smiles in agreement, adding, "When a customer tells me, 'Thank you, I had a wonderful night.' This is the prize." **P**

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