

CHOW, BELLA!

NICOLA'S HOME BRINGS RUSTIC
OPULENCE AND GRACIOUS GLAMOUR
TO SOUTH PORTLAND'S TUSCAN TABLE

Here's the thing you need to know about Tuscans: They love their pig. Wild boar, to be exact, which they manage through some Latinate alchemy to render from a tusked, hairy-hided hellhog into a succulent, tender, melt-in-your-mouth heaven sauce that once you have tasted you will never forget. My husband and I honeymooned in Tuscany nigh on some 20 years ago and spent two weeks rolling up and down the undulant hill towns enjoying the proud alleys of poplars and the medieval architecture and the red, red wines. But, truly, after that first bite of wild boar *ragu* (or the far more musical *cinghiale*, which, like everything else, sounds better in Italian), it was all I could remember. I returned from Italy knowing precisely three simple, if crucial, phrases: "*Dov'è il bagno?*" "*Una tavola per due,*" and "*Cinghiale, per favore!*" "Where's the bathroom?" "Table for two," and "Wild boar, please!"

These memories, and even my limited Italian returned to me the moment I walked into the welcoming foyer of Tuscan Table. At South Portland's poshest eatery, the latest from restaurateur/entrepreneur Ed Manganello (of Tuscan Bistro in Freeport and Royal River Grill House in Yarmouth), they wear their pig proudly. It's right there on the sign and painted on the side of the building.

Nicola Manganello Harnden of Nicola's Home (and Ed's daughter) is the designer responsible for giving the 184-seat restaurant the rustic, grounded glamour she's known for. With a background in art (the Yarmouth native studied sculpture at MECA) and 20 years of designing home and commercial interiors, Harnden was more than equipped to transform the once humdrum space into something truly spectacular.

Words: ALLISON PAIGE Photos: JONATHAN REECE



The warm and welcoming foyer of Tuscan Table is lined with rakes, tines-up, and crowned by one of the many gorgeous wooden chandeliers, in an easy interplay of the decor's rustic and elegant elements.



A mezzanine-view overlooks the restaurant's signature pendant lamps and expansive oval bar where the high, curving shelves hold gem-like bottles of locally distilled spirits and classic aperitifs.



“We did everything. We took it down to the shell,” she says. From the ceiling to the floor, to all electrical systems, the formerly cavernous 6,252-square-foot space required its own special alchemy to transform it into the hip and elegant oasis it is now. (In a faraway time, in another dimension, it was once a Pizza Hut Italian Bistro.)

“There is nothing like it out there,” she relates, referring to the bustling epicenter of South Portland commerce. That is an understatement, to say the least—which makes the experience all the more surprising. When you step inside the building and stand beneath the enormous wooden chandelier, look down and you may notice that the light throws a sunflower pattern on the floor. That’s no accident—it’s the sort of detail Harnden brings with her artist’s eye—and chimes nicely with the oversized sunflower mural on the side wall, done in moody, jewel tones. Of the many thoughtful accents chosen, she says, “It has to evoke meaning to include it.”

It’s an environment designed to transport people up and away to someplace urbane and cosmopolitan. Harnden calls it “something truly special and completely different from the norm out there of chains—which Tuscan Table is not.” It also offers plentiful, free parking, which is more than you can say for the Old Port.

The showpiece of the restaurant is the dramatic 37-foot-diameter oval marble-topped bar, which encircles the center of the space, seats 40, and occupies the lion’s share of the dining room. Its elongated round-table effect makes

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One of two staircases accessing the mezzanine is flanked by a mural of over-sized sunflowers done in unexpectedly moody jewel tones.



The ladies' bathroom mixes whimsical touches, such as its "dancing elephant" wallpaper, with lustrous gold-tone hardware. Straw sunburst mirrors and a chevron-patterned vanity bring extra texture to the space.

for a convivial cocktail hour as you can't help but chat with your neighbor and admire what they've ordered. Beautiful oversized pendant lamps of woven wood descend from the 20-foot ceiling, casting a warm glow and bringing to mind full fishermen's nets. A mezzanine level overlooks the action and contains 18 more tables, while the restaurant's two-story wine vault, visible from both floors, provides the eatery with its extensive wine menu.

Textural details, from the stone-and-terra-cotta tile surrounding the bar to the rich, variegated fabrics of the pillows on the banquettes, give the space a sumptuous feeling. Harnden also added touches of whimsy here and there. The wallpaper in the women's bathroom is bedecked with what she calls "dancing elephants," while the straw starburst mirrors alone made me want to go back and freshen up my lipstick again, just for fun.

As with all of her projects, Harnden aims to "keep the eye intrigued," she says, so that each visit reveals a new layer to the dining experience—it is a measure she accomplishes beautifully with this latest commercial venture.

Executive Chef Brandon Jennings provides a rotating menu of Italian and Mediterranean fare, offering handmade pasta and locally sourced meat and seafood. The open kitchen boasts two Le Panyol wood-fired ovens

for turning out delicate, char-crusted pizzas and grilled small plates. There are plenty of classic options, from chicken parmigiana to spaghetti carbonara, and on the lighter side, fresh-caught oysters, scallops, salmon, and haddock. Pork is on the menu, I am happy to report, primo to entrée—from the charcuterie selection (a Berkel slicer at the bar shaves salumi paper thin) to the pork Milanese to the meatballs, the last of which I devoured happily, savoring every bite.

It's nice to know I won't have to jump on a plane to enjoy the kind of memorable Italian dishes and ambiance I experienced as a newlywed. In fact, it's just a short jaunt down I-295. Diners in search of the same should not be leery of the location. Whether you go for a quick lunch, a buzzy happy hour, or a lingering dinner, Nicola's Home has built nothing less than a portal to the Old Country and for this particular diner, something of a time machine, taking me back to my very own *luna di miele*. Although just yards away from Macy's and Books-A-Million, for a few hours we were back on the banks of the Arno.

Tuscan Table in South Portland is open for lunch and dinner seven days a week. Hours are 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Sunday through Thursday, 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Friday and Saturday. ■