



Primi

could make a whole meal of it." Like everyone else, I've said that a hundred times in Italian restaurants when served a first course or pasta I really liked, and, given the Italian inclination to extravagance, frequently the serving was generous enough for a whole meal. Piero Selvaggio, proprietor of Valentino, where portions are as ample as they are artful, grew so weary of hearing customers complain they were too full for the main course that he decided to eliminate it altogether. At Primi, Selvaggio's flashy new restaurant near Rancho Park in West Los Angeles, first things not only come first but second, third, and fourth in a menu designed entirely around antipasti and pastas—the *primi piatti* ("first plates"). (Well, not entirely. Selvaggio is savvy enough to follow the *primi* with *poi*—literally, "then"—which is how the menu introduces all those fantasies of chocolate with clouds of cream that no one ever seems too full to eat.) It was a clever idea because many customers prefer the starters to the entrées anyway. Even so, Selvaggio was surprised at how quickly Primi caught on. The restaurant has been packed since the day it opened last July.

Whereas Valentino is a traditional *ristorante* with an old-fashioned, stodgy interior, Primi is modern and jazzy. Pointing out the cherubic *putti* decorating the ceiling around the bar as symbolic of the restaurant, Primi's originator calls it "Valentino's and Piero's child." It is a child of the eighties, bright and noisy, tables tight together, all pink, black, and sleek gray. In the main room (a quieter garden room is next to it), a reflective stainless steel ceiling mirrors the beautiful people upside down as well as artist Robert Benton's even more beautiful silk sculptures draped on the wall. A floor-to-ceiling temperature-controlled glass case is stocked with what amounts to a drop in the barrel from Valentino's extensive wine cellar. "I couldn't make them all available at Primi," Selvaggio explained. "As the wines printed on the menu reveal, Selvaggio's friends are well placed in California, Italy, and France and include a young Italian winemaker he admires so much that, in a break with tradition, he offers his sparkling Ca' del Bosco by the glass instead of a French Champagne."

To cook the *primi piatti*, Selvaggio found Elvira, a friend from his native Sicily, to make the complicated flower-shaped pastas and the old-fashioned *focaccia*, Italian flatbread. Then he lured four of "the

most promising young chefs in Italy" from leading restaurants in and around Bologna and Milan. By coincidence, perhaps, they are also very handsome, which may be why Selvaggio put them on view in a semi-open kitchen in the rear of the dining room where their youthful energy and charm wouldn't be wasted on their co-workers. Never underestimate the drawing power of a good-looking Italian chef.

Handsome is as handsome does, as they say in New England but probably not in Italy. For the most part the chefs do very well, sometimes brilliantly, though their performance was decidedly uneven during my visits to Primi. But even when a dish isn't all it could be, it gets by on sheer novelty and the quality of the ingredients that go into it. Few of Primi's *piatti* have been seen elsewhere in town except at Valentino, which tested out many of them months before the restaurant opened. And although a meal at Primi costs a third of a full dinner at Valentino, the kitchens use the same baby greens, imported cheeses, and fragrant olive oil and are both sticklers for freshness.

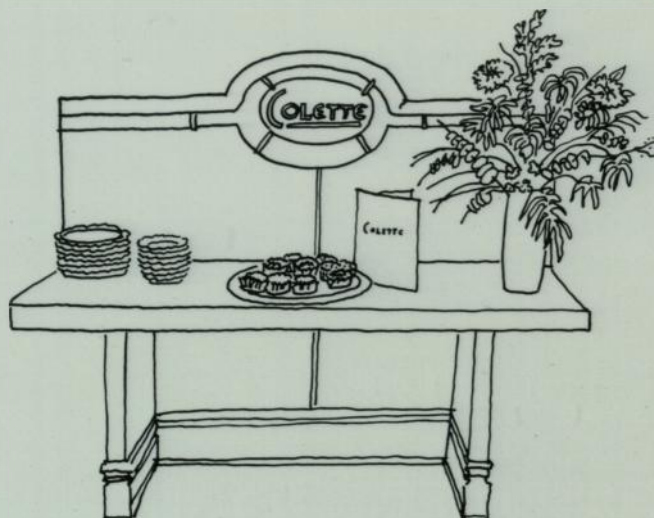
Consider a few of Primi's appealing antipasti: a basil-scented timbale of eggplant filled with smoky cheeses and black olives in a pool of fresh tomato purée; a buttery wedge of grilled polenta accompanying a juicy grilled quail rubbed with rosemary and stuffed with a savory pâté; a heap of baby butter clams in an aromatic broth, one spoonful of which induces garlic and basil shock; a warm salad of chicory and *radic-*

chio with strips of chicken and crumbled Gorgonzola. Although Primi has done away with main dishes, it hasn't cut down on the work in the kitchen, for the menu requires just as much preparation. A good fish stock figured in the creamy sauce with mushrooms and hazelnuts for a beautiful sautéed turbot one evening. A pan-seared breast of duck wrapped around black olive caviar came with a complex duck reduction sauce. It took considerable time to produce a stuffed breast of rabbit, a sort of Italian galantine spangled with prosciutto, pine nuts, hard-boiled egg, and peas, which was presented enticingly with lovely little greens and slivers of red pepper glistening with olive oil.

An original dish that intrigued me paired Santa Barbara spot shrimp with swordfish in a spicy sauce with pink peppercorns. The swordfish, pounded in thin slices and wrapped around the shelled shrimp before they went on the grill, kept them moist and added a pleasingly crunchy texture rather like browned salt pork.

One of the simplest antipasti—*olio extra vergine e soppressata*—is also one of the best. It consists of slices of superior salami and prosciutto, sturdy toasts to put them on, and olive oil poured in a well in the center of the plate, but oh! what an oil, with a flavor of sun-warmed fruits and a luminous yellow-green color. Selvaggio calls it *l'affiorato*—the flower of olive oil—which is so immaculately conceived that it precedes the first pressing that produces extra-virgin oil.

Spécialités de la Maison CALIFORNIA



BY CAROLINE BATES