



First Look: Varuni Napoli



John Kessler

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Varuni Napoli Porreca Piccante. Contributed by Scott Long.

A slender, friendly middle-aged Italian man leans over our table and asks if everything is all right. He looks energized and maybe a touch flustered by the suddenly full, suddenly noisy, suddenly happening dining room.

“Is this your restaurant?” my daughter asks.

“Yesss . . . ,” he says, smiling broadly.

“Are you the chef?” she continues.

“No, ” he laughs, “I’m the architect.”

Architect-owner. That’s a first.

To be clear, chef Luca Varuni has his name on the door of Morningside-Lenox Park’s banging new pizzeria, **Varuni Napoli**. But he has gone into business with the man standing before us, Giancarlo Pirrone. The partnership between these two is a fruitful one, and you know it in your bones the moment you enter this former manufacturing warehouse.

Your eye will be drawn first to the curvaceous green Vespa set like sculpture on the open floor, then to the huge open kitchen. There, two blue domed pizza ovens rise side by side, sensuous and sturdy, like Brunhilde’s breastplate writ large. Along the kitchen runs a white Carrara marble dining counter as long as a runway. Beyond it stands a portal to the back lounge and a door to the enclosed patio.

More than anything, this restaurant is a social space. Open and airy, it comes off a little confusing, as if you’ve arrived at a party in a gorgeous house where you don’t know anyone but love the crowd you discover hanging out in the kitchen. If someone’s kid skitters underfoot, or you can’t figure out where to get ice water, that’s part of the free-spirited charm of a restaurant that encourages wandering. Pirrone — a former architecture professor and current president of a real estate holding company — has an Italian’s sure sense for how a bustling public space makes people happy. Add pizza, and happiness turns to outright glee.

Varuni follows through with a funny, unpredictable kind of generosity that may involve a few off-menu gifts from the kitchen.

For now, guests order at the counter, but by the time this article goes to press, the servers may be wandering the floor with mobile devices, like Apple Store employees, ready to take their orders and directing them to tables.

If you need a little nosh right away, you can stopper your hunger with some prewarmed arancini (rice fritters filled with ground beef and peas) or panzerotti (potato croquettes with pecorino cheese). Neither is great.

But — happy, happy — the pizza often is. Varuni, a native of Naples, trained at the highly regarded La Notizia in his hometown and is known locally for his stint at Antico Pizza Napoletana. Fresh from the oven, his pizzas can be spectacular. I love the pitch-perfect seasoning in both his dough and red sauce, and the way they meld inside a riot of black and brown crust blisters.

The margherita (termed a “classic” pizza on the menu) features the unbeatable trinity of bufala mozzarella, tomato and basil. The Porreca Piccante (from the list of “artisan” creations) adds hot Calabrian peppers and every kind of spicy cured pork from capicola to ‘nduja you could want.

Fair warning: The house style is pretty classically Neapolitan, so it’s thin and grows a bit goopy-puddly in the center (if no less lovable) as it sits.

I found the Partenope — a vegetarian white pizza festooned with colorful roasted peppers, olives and onions — got a bit dull after the first slice, but it's no fair sampling alongside the spicy pork-o-rama. Ditto the house specialty fried calzone, called Reginella, filled with an indulgent gush of cow's milk mozzarella, ricotta, salami and basil. Tasty, yes, but please pass the pizza back my way.



Reginella fried pizza. Contributed by Scott Long

But here's the fun part. Varuni, a master schmoozer, loves bringing gifts to the table. He offers us a plate of eggplant, each thin slice grilled to a near crisp and swiped with balsamic vinaigrette. Do we want to try the pasta? Why not? Soon, we have a small plate of ditalini (tiny pasta tubes) in a thick, salty potato sauce dotted with chunks of ham. I bet every kid in the dining room fell in love with it. (For the record, Varuni recognized me as a critic, but everyone around us got the same treatment.)

Before long, he's plying the dining room with bottles of industrial-strength limoncello and shot glasses. You say no, then you say yes, then you stumble out.

Of course, we love the spirit of all these gifts. Double negative alert: You can't not walk out of this place an instant fan. Still, I wish a few more of those good vegetables would show up as antipasti. It would be great to have more options on the menu beyond green salad and salami as add-ons to the meal. Until that happens, I'll happily gorge on pizza.

– by John Kessler for Atlanta Restaurant Scene

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FrankPagano

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Yeah ate there 10 days ago. Wouldn't say I didn't leave a fan since I got my food to go. After I ate the white pie with mushrooms and truffle salt. I was not a fan. I was astounded that I had paid over \$20 bucks for what this guy was trying to put off as