

Your home away from Rome

For outstanding Italian cuisine, all roads lead to Lupa in Village

By DANIEL YOUNG
DAILY NEWS RESTAURANT CRITIC

★★★★

LUPA: 170 Thompson St., between Houston & Bleecker Sts.; (212) 982-5089. Tues.-Sun. Reservations accepted for rear dining room only. Major credit. Appetizers, \$3-\$8; pastas, \$9-\$12; main courses, \$11-\$15. Handicap access: entrance up one step.

Alas, the world is not perfect. Yes, a great chef has just opened the cozy Italian spot of our Greenwich Village dreams. Yes, there now exist adorable white bowls of superlatively simple pasta for as little as \$9. Yes, a fall collection of cutting-edge entrees does max out at an absurdly enlightened \$15. And yes, over a dozen Italian wine finds are poured by the carafina — a tiny carafe that a romantic duo can use to sip-sample the moonlit night away.

But all this comes with a problem: getting a table here at Lupa, Mario Batali's 70-seat trattoria paradiso. This rave is hardly likely to shorten the "hour" wait — which can sometimes exceed 120 minutes — in prime time. So, sup early — say, around 6 p.m. That's how I was able to partake of this new New York dining marvel that, lira for lira, has no equal.

Named after the she-wolf of Roman mythology and inspired by Rome's neighborhood trattorie, Lupa is the second smash-hit collaboration in two years of Babbo co-owners Batali (Po) and Joe Bastianich (Becco). Partner Jason Denton (Ino) manages a countrified space, disentangling snarls and assisting an informed but overtaxed service staff.

Chef Mark Ladner, previously Babbo's second-in-command, plays with the Italian regional influences and New World constructions that together define Mario's "Batalian" cooking. But if the command performance at Babbo could



HOWARD SIMMONS DAILY NEWS

LIRA-CALLY PRAISED An empty table is a rarity when things get cooking at Village restaurant Lupa, where the wait for seating during peak periods can top two hours.

be described as electric, then Lupa's act is an acoustic set.

Antipasti, though stripped down to the basics, are anything but artless. A delicately bound headcheese of octopus and preserved lemon collapses upon fork contact. Citrus-curing blunts the fishiness but not the character of iridescent sardines dangling over a pilaf-like pillow of cracked wheat. And cacciatorini sausage you could nibble on all afternoon is sided with artichokes and anchovy vinaigrette.

Forgoing pasta? Not an option. At lunch, bucatini, the thick-gauge spaghetti unrivaled for slurping but disastrous for dating, acquires a black-olive pesto. My advice: Wear black.

At dinner, pappardella is tossed with a sweet and superrich duck ragu made faintly bitter by sage and cocoa. And on Thursday, gnocchi night in Rome, semolina gnocchi as light as miniature soufflés

dissolve into their blanket of melted stracchino cheese.

Among main courses, a thick hunk of house-salted cod sets the gritty crispness of its coarse breading against the silkiness of the fish and the crunch of fennel. Dry-rubbed crusty sliced hanger steak is paired with a peperonata (sweet pepper stew) dusted with coarse salt. Quail marinated in honey and Balsamic has the lacquer of great barbecue. And lushly braised oxtail comes as an entree or in a lunch sandwich with a good inch of caramelized onions. Only the sweet-and-pungent-masked monkfish lacks lasting appeal.

For closers, the wonderfully dense honey panna cotta dissuades few from digging a spoon into the tartufo, here a baseball of ice cream with homemade Nutella (chocolate hazelnut sauce). When in Lupa, you do as the Romans do.

WHAT THE STARS MEAN:

★★★★ AWESOME ★★★ SPECIAL
★★ GOOD ★ GOOD FOR SOMETHING
NO STARS FUHGEDDABOUTIT