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PHOTO BY JESSE KISHAN

BY AMY KEPFERLE

Il Caffe Rifugio

YEP, IT'S WORTH THE DRIVE

COLD FEBRUARY rain battered the sturdy silver bullet on wheels, which confidently sliced its way safely through the dreary deluge. We were leaving Bellingham behind for a few hours, and the Volvo was pointed in the direction of fun—also known as Deming.

If we'd kept following the Mt. Baker Highway, we would've gained a fair amount of elevation and soon seen the wet stuff turn to snow. However, it was a Wednesday night and we weren't on track to strap on our skis and headlamps and venture into the backcountry, but to unfurl napkins on our laps, have a glass or two of *vino* and learn more about a gem of a restaurant known as Il Caffe Rifugio.

First off, you should know that, if it's a Wednesday evening and you're reading this story, the eatery isn't typically open for dinner until Thursdays. We'd pulled some strings to get owner Richard Balogh to keep the doors open for us past normal closing hours, so he'd left the lights on and kept the oven toasty warm.

Those familiar with the edible lore surrounding Deming would probably recognize the outside of the building that, for many years, contained

Carol's Coffee Cup (not to mention the legendary cinnamon rolls that could be found within its doors). But step inside, and you'll see a whole lot has changed.

In addition to the visual changes brought about by minty green walls, gleaming wood tables and subdued lighting, for the past three years the space has also been home to a new kind of establishment—one that still features cinnamon rolls and cups of joe for locals and travelers making their way up and down the mountain, but has expanded to include fare that most definitely qualifies as "fine dining."

Although Balogh serves a variety of pastries and sandwiches for breakfast and lunch, it was clear from the first decadent

bite of cheese-filled ravioli with curry cream sauce that, when dinnertime comes around, he's on steady footing.

"Our dinner menu is Italian in inspiration, but leaves room to cross over into Asian and Slavic influences," Balogh told me later. "I am always searching for new ideas from old Italian cookbooks. My current focus would be Sicily—the birthplace of my grandfather."

Balogh also informed me that he keeps his fare fresh and local to the best of his ability, and that the dinner menu's always changing (last week's specials, for example, included everything from wild Pacific cod encrusted with hazelnuts to green "Carnevale" lasagna).

On the night we visited, however, the theme seemed to be "comfort food that took a stab at being fancy, and succeeded." After cruising through our small plates of raviolis and dinner salads drizzled with Richard's own marionberry vinaigrette—which I'm hereby declaring one of my top five salad dressings ever—we tucked into lambwiches with aioli on Bread Farm baguettes ("Incredibly well-balanced," one diner commented).



EAT

WHAT: Il Caffe Rifugio

WHEN: 11am-4pm Tues.-Wed., 11am-8pm Thurs.-Fri., 8am-8pm Sat., and 8am-4pm Sun.

WHERE: 5415 Mt. Baker Hwy

INFO: 592-2888 or www.ilcafferifugio.com

From there, we received "simple" Italian grilled cheese sandwiches (pesto, mozzarella and tomato) and, finally, flank steak with polenta and mushrooms. The meat seemed to melt in my mouth, along with the mashed-potato-esque polenta, and I savored each and every last morsel of fungi.

Working alone that night, Balogh nevertheless offered up a brief explanation of each course that came

our way—between the delivery of it and the time he scurried back to the kitchen. As the diners discussed everything from the Huffington Post's recent media buyout to which of us was born and bred in Whatcom County, the chef unobtrusively presented us with a memorable meal.

"I have to say I like putting on a show," Balogh said. "[I enjoy] setting the scene, listening to people's great stories and leading them into something different."

As we prepared to take our leave and head back into the fray, one of the diners across from me—a woman who says she spends a lot of time in the kitchen—noted that her tried-and-true formula for figuring out if a restaurant was going to get her repeat service was that if she could make anything she'd eaten better than the cook at the helm, she wouldn't be back.

"That certainly wasn't a problem here," she added as she zipped up her coat and left the building. I concurred, and, with that, stepped back into the wet, wonderful night. ☺