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# CRAFTY MEALS AND FRESH INGREDIENTS RULE THE DAY AT FARMER'S BOTTEGA

CRAFTY MEALS AND FRESH INGREDIENTS RULE THE DAY AT FARMER'S BOTTEGA

By Frank Sabatini Jr.



Farm-to-table cuisine in Mission Hills



A loaded bloody Mary



An assortment of French toast and pancakes



Pecan-crusted chicken sandwich



Marechalio Meatballs

Sicilian-born chef and restaurateur Alberto Morreale has mastered the art of creating meals that combine his European heritage with inventive American and Mexican twists. In tying the two together, he brings to the table a *lucovore* sensibility, meaning that many of his ingredients are sourced from local and regional growers and producers.

In other words, he's a farm-to-table kind of guy.

Since opening Farmer's Bottega in Mission Hills almost five years ago, I've savored Morreale's heirloom tomato salads dressed in saucy vinaigrettes, his little jars of eggplant caponata and Fresno chili hummus, and his expert use of charcuterie by The Meatmen based in Claremont.

I also recall savoring a fabulous early-

winter meal of flat-iron pork accented with caramelized apples and bedded atop mashed butternut squash, with none of the ingredients coming from Sysco.

Whatever time of year, his dinners play up to the seasons with delightful accord.

It wasn't until recently, however, that I stepped into his world of brunch, which provides guests with numerous breakfast and lunch options from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., seven days a week.

Amid such classics as ham and pepper omelets, egg-and-bacon plates with house potatoes, and huevos rancheros, the breakfast choices veer refreshingly off the beaten track, as do some of the lunch offerings.

My companion ordered a bloody Mary, although it wasn't the outrageous version you'll see at Morreale's La Mesa location, where customers can order the drink crowned with a whole, roasted chicken. Those aren't available here, but you nonetheless get a fair festooning of garnishments.

The Chile relleno omelet we chose contained medium-size shrimp along with the semi-spicy poblano pepper stuffed with nutty-tasting Manchego cheese. But the filling didn't end there: A small avalanche of roasted corn tumbled out as we cut in, adding a tinge of

sweetness to contrast the chili pepper. Adorned with chipotle cream on top, the flavors and textures were in tasteful harmony.

Equally rivishing were the cubed truffle Parmesan potatoes on the side. I often find breakfast potatoes insipid and served in over-abundance. These were very much the opposite, the kind I wished came in a crazy large portion.

Pancakes and French toast, we decided, would be our dessert after turning some attention to the lunch menu, at which point we put in advance requests for doggie bags.

A pecan-crusted chicken breast tucked into a roll with arugula, bacon and Gorgonzola cheese offered a delectable crunch than rivaled panko crumbs or classic buttermilk batter. The sturdy coating sealed in the meat's juices and added richness to an already indulgent sandwich.



The dining room greets with a warm, organic feel.

From several flat bread pizzas available, the prosciutto-covered version we chose was salty as expected, with the cured ham overpowering the subtleties of the fresh mozzarella and arugula also blanketing the crust. Less of the meat would have been preferable to this sodium-sensitive palate.

Our finale involved a trio of items served on a canoe-shaped platter. This is the way to go if you're undecided over the various pancakes and French toast choices on the menu.

The lemon-poppyseed pancake was elegant in flavor and barely needed syrup. Cinnamon-raisin French toast offered tingling sweetness and a nice bread-like texture. I would have never guessed it was gluten-free. And the tiramisu French toast involved lady fingers dipped in "a secret coffee recipe" in lieu of bread. It came with espresso-kissed mascarpone cheese, which took the place of butter.

Mozzarella proves that quality doesn't have to suffer in the face of expanded menu choices, which is exactly what you're faced with when eating at Farmer's Bottega in the morning or afternoon. (The dinner menu is slightly more refined.) In terms of service, our waiter demonstrated efficient knowledge of the food

as he timed our courses with precision on this busy weekend morning.

Seating options stretch from the roomy main dining room and intimate bar to a patio in the back. And as you would expect from a restaurant that relies on produce and eggs from area farms—and breads, cheeses and coffee beans from San Diego-based vendors—the interior is rustically appointed with antiques, brick, and well-stocked wine cubbies.

Indeed, the word "bottega" in the restaurant's name is appropriately used, denoting a workshop where skilled craftspeople practice their trade. Here, that workshop is an industrious kitchen headed by a seasoned chef and his team cooks trained to sometimes defy culinary norms with originality.

**Farmer's Bottega is located in the heart of Mission Hills at 860 W. Washington St. For more information call 619-458-9929 or visit [www.farmers-bottega.com](http://www.farmers-bottega.com).**



A fluffy lemon-poppyseed pancake



Prosciutto flatbread