

Pasquale Jones Brings Something Fresh to the Dining Landscape

By Adam Platt [Follow @plattypants](#)



Pasquale Jones. Photo: Tirzah Brot/New York Magazine

That old bellwether of the New York dining landscape, the Italian restaurant, has lately undergone what Darwinians like to call an “evolutionary leap.” Many eons ago, the Red Sauce Epoch gave way to the Age of the Trattoria, which in turn gave way, in certain quarters, to the rise of elevated gourmet establishments like Michael White’s *Marea* and Mario Batali’s *Babbo* and *Del Posto*. Lately, however, these dinosaur-size operations, and even some trattorias, have been overtaken by a smaller, more nimble (and yes, faster-breeding) species of Italian joint. Grand venues have been replaced by boxy, adaptable little spaces, and baroque multicourse menus have been reduced to a single, tiny page. Tuscan trophy wines have given way to trendy Sicilian peasant blends, lavish ragùs have been replaced by simple classics (*cacio e pepe*, anyone?), and while a few old dinosaurs still survive in their ancient habitats, without an ancient wood-burning oven (or two) on the premises, the chances of survival out on the great Italian fine-dining savannah are increasingly slim.

Chef Ryan Hardy’s sporty, Mini Cooper-sized Soho restaurant, *Charlie Bird*, was an early example of this chically adaptable Italian style, and if anything, his new Nolita venture, *Pasquale Jones*, moves the evolutionary needle even further in the direction of Sparseness and utility. He and his partners (the wine impresarios Grant Reynolds and Robert Bohr) have fit the snug room on the corner of Mulberry and Kenmare with simple globe lights, and the kind of scuffed mosaic-tile floor you might find in the kitchen of a train-station café in Milan. Two small rows of slate tabletops and a couple of half-moon banquettes are folded, origami style, into this little space, along with an elegantly utilitarian wraparound bar where you can sip a reasonably priced quartino of interesting Corsican wine (ask for the ‘13 Domaine Giacometti) while watching cooks flip a succession of dishes (seasonally appropriate leeks, chunks of locally caught cuttlefish, the inevitable pizzas) in and out of not one but two large, gently glowing, state-of-the-art wood-burning ovens.

The single-page menu here is even more abbreviated than the one at *Charlie Bird*, but Hardy and the San Francisco chef, Tim Caspare, arrange their elemental ingredients on the plate in all sorts of enticing ways. The aforementioned leeks are scattered with toasted walnuts and shingles of Parmigiano-Reggiano, and the plump, ivory-colored cuttlefish is enlivened with shreds of chile pepper and wedges of a lemon plucked from the famous Sorrento-lemon trees south of Naples. I don’t know where the artichoke hearts I enjoyed one evening came from (they’re served with slivers of fennel-rich finocchiona salami), but they’re Neapolitan quality too, as are the charred, puffy-edged pizzas and the house calzone, stuffed with *caciocavallo*, shreds of prosciutto, and choppings of broccoli rabe. All of these pizzas are good, but the ones I had to be restrained from ordering again were the clam (littlenecks, garlic, the faintest drizzle of lemon and cream) and that old purists’ favorite, the marinara, which is dappled with little black Taggiasca olives and rich spoonfuls of sauce, which, unlike lots of marinaras around town, doesn’t taste like the bottom of a tomato can.

In addition to a handful of generally well-executed pastas (try the baby-goat pappardelle or the deeply funky, anchovy-laced Martelli spaghetti), there are just four entrées available at this diminutive, oddly named, highly satisfying restaurant, all of which emerge sizzling from the wood-burning oven in varying states of deliciousness. We sampled bite-size pieces of crispy-skinned spring chicken on my visits, and a soft hunk of wild striped bass garnished with mushrooms and spring onions, which tasted like it had just been fished out from under the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. The beefeaters at my table went slightly mad over the well-aged bone-in rib eye for two (\$125, with a giant charred onion as big as a softball), although for maximum utility, I recommend the \$48 pork shank, also for two, which is braised to an almost fruity tenderness and finished with lardo and fennel pollen. Add a pizza or two, and the simple house dessert (grilled pineapples with mascarpone-flavored ice cream one evening, pears with the same gelato the next), and it’s enough to feed a discerning family of four out on the great savannah for close to a week.

★★★☆☆

Pasquale Jones

187 Mulberry St., at Kenmare St.; no phone yet; pasqualejones.com

Open: Dinner Tuesday to Sunday.

Prices: Small plates, \$7 to \$20; large plates, \$18 to \$32, with a \$125 rib eye for two.

Ideal Meal: Warm leeks, clam pizza, chicken and/or pork shank, grilled fruit with gelato.

Note: The wine list is chock-full of interesting, out-of-the-way Italian bottles.

Scratchpad: Two stars for the simple, satisfying cooking and another for the wines.