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Santa Barbara Life & Style Magazine

July/August 2025



STOP & SMELL THE ROSES



LA DOLCE

OSPI MONTECITO—WHERE THE ITALIAN RIVIERA & CENTRAL COAST COLLIDE

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PHOTOGRAPHY Max Milla

VITA

Santa Barbara's newest ode to la dolce vita, Ospì Montecito introduces the American Riviera to the sun-kissed flavors and flair of the Italian Riviera. Tucked inside The Post—Montecito's chic open-air enclave of shops and restaurants—Ospì is owner and chef Jackson Kalb's latest love letter to fresh and flavorful Italian dining.

"I've wanted to open in Montecito for years," says Jackson. "We began looking shortly after the first Ospì opened." For those who don't know, Ospì Montecito marks the restaurant's fourth location—the other three being in Venice, Brentwood and Costa Mesa. And while the dream took some time, Jackson believes the wait was worth it. "Everything worked out in the end because we're extremely happy with our location choice and grateful that we enjoy our landlord's company very much," he says.

Ospì is warm and welcoming—no surprise, given that its name comes from the Italian word *ospitante*, meaning "host." Dining here feels like scoring an invite to an exclusive dinner party organized by that one effortlessly cool couple. A spacious outdoor patio wraps around the restaurant, while the interior achieves the perfect harmony of luxury and comfort.

"Reservation for Andrea, party of two," I say, greeted instantly with a smile. My first impression? Busy. An impressive feat, especially considering the restaurant opened a week earlier. "Look at all the lights," my boyfriend and plus one, Atticus, says. I count four distinct light fixtures—five if you include the ones illuminating the artwork on the walls. It's abundantly clear that no detail was overlooked in the design of the space. Hues of green and gold dash and dance across the restaurant; the marble tabletops lend an elevated backdrop to every Instagram-worthy snapshot; and an Art Deco-inspired aesthetic marries everything together. In the middle of the restaurant sits a grandiose island bar that boasts a striking jade countertop, and directly behind it, an ornate display of spirits. "The inspiration came from a touch of Art Deco vibes from old-school New York 'red-sauce' joints combined with our coastal-inspired sense of place. We wanted it to be modern and airy during the day, but dark and moody at night," says Jackson.

We're led to a booth with plush viridian seats and a sleek, silver light fixture above our heads that resembles a UFO. A fitting touch, as we'd soon be transported to the distant shores of Italy upon our first bite.

Our first order of business: cocktails. I find it difficult choosing between the "lusty martini" and another named, "hot girl summer." I ultimately decide on the latter. Atticus orders the "chef's negroni," and both cocktails exceed our expectations. "Hot girl summer" arrives in a dainty martini glass adorned with a basil leaf. Its vivid rose hue mimics a radiant Santa Barbara sunset; it tastes of summer, shaken and chilled. The negroni arrives with a lime peel gracing its rim. It exhibits many notes, including some that are smokey and others that are sweet. And if you're in the mood for a mocktail, Ospì's extensive menu does not disappoint. Perhaps you can sample their "cool as a cucumber" mocktail or the one they call "light & stormy."

Up next, *antipasti*. Thankfully, we can rely on the recommendations of our two knowledgeable servers, Chloe and Dani. "The meatballs are the star of the show," says Dani. She's referring to the wood-grilled "Neapolitan meatballs" made with beef, pork and ricotta, among other ingredients. Chloe eagerly recommends the "Japanese eggplant" dish, made with spicy tomato oil, *parm fonduta*, *pangrattato* and basil. When in doubt, order both. The meatballs are tender, perfectly browned on the outside and smothered in a delicious sauce. And to our surprise: spicy. But if the meatballs are the star of the show, the eggplants are the entire movie, press tour and sequel. Undoubtedly a dish that will keep us coming back for more, these eggplants are fried to crispy perfection, covered in toasted breadcrumbs and fresh basil, and everything loaded potato skins aspire to be. Being American-Armenian, eggplants are a staple in my culture's cuisine. I've just about enjoyed them every which way you can imagine—baked, grilled, whipped—you name it. So picture my delight when this eggplant dish arrives, prepared in a way that I haven't yet had the pleasure of experiencing. Consider this your sign; order this delicious delicacy when you visit Ospì.

We can't help but notice the open-concept kitchen directly ahead, where chef hands are busy at work. They're sporting shirts that read "Anti Pasta Pasta Club," a clever spin on the trendy Anti Social Social Club shirts. The open-concept kitchen is no doubt intentional, as Jackson prefers the limelight to be cast on his team. "I'm happy that most people don't know who the owner is. My name is not on the menu, and that is by design," says Jackson. "I want our team to take ownership of their positions, so the General Manager and day-to-day Executive Sous Chef have their names on the menu."

Atticus and I take in Ospì's ambiance and atmosphere as we converse about our day and the delicious forkfuls of food we just shared. Ospì has a way of bringing people together over sophisticated cocktails and thoughtfully curated plates. I scan the restaurant, and everyone appears busy in conversation, phones out of sight and nodding in contentment over shared bites and sips.

Ospì makes their pastas daily from scratch using Italian and domestic, biodynamic and sustainable wheat with up to three different types of flour and local, pasture-raised hen eggs. Needless to say, ordering pasta feels like a no-brainer. Chloe informs us that they're known for their vodka sauce, and it's what Jackson recommends too. "Anything with the vodka sauce is a must," says Jackson. "It's practically our identity at this point. The sleeper hit is the 'ceci e tria'—a chickpea-based pasta from an extremely tiny town in the Southeastern region of Italy." I opt for the "spicy rigatoni" featuring their famous vodka sauce and Atticus lands on the "tagliatelle." Upon first bite, it's evident that the pastas are in fact made from scratch, offering fresh and delicate textures with sauces that feel light and airy, not heavy. Their pastas are silky, tender and made to be devoured. We turn down dessert as we're tragically too full, but not without asking for some takeaway boxes. A meal this good deserves to be savored the next day, too. *Arrivederci* Ospì Montecito, until next time.*

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