



Eola

RATING: ★★★★★
2020 P St., NW,
202.466.4441, eoladc.com

THE SCENE *Dinner party with strangers. A serene, comfortable cocoon and fabulous people watching views of busy P Street from the table in the bay window.*

WHO'S THERE *A selective, convivial food-smart set enjoying a legal underground dinner party sensation.*

GOOD TO KNOW *Eola has a great Twitter feed (@eoladc). On Sundays, wander from the Dupont FreshFarm Market to Eola's brunch, featuring a bacon flight.*

HOURS *Dinner Tues.-Sun., 5:30-10:30PM; Sun. Brunch 11:30AM-3:30PM.*

PRICES *Dinner starters \$9-12, entrées \$22-29, desserts \$8-10. Brunch menu \$8-13.*

Chowtown Showdown

A pair of streetwise Dupont Circle neighbors stir up a rumble

| By Mary Beth Albright | Photography by Powers and Crewe |

"I paid a few hundred dollars to shell Peter Pastan's fava beans," a pal confided gleefully as I headed to Obelisk for a rapturous Italian feast. I'm only a little jealous of her in-the-know-decades-ago story, a fabulous charity prize she bid on. I have a delicious tidbit of my own: Obelisk's heir as DC's under-the-radar edible treasure is right across the street. The year-old Eola is an upstart counterpart to its blockmate. They may be in different townhouses, separated by a generation, but they're built of the same delicious stuff.

In 1987, a daring young chef channeled the best of that era's food trends—sushi's freshness, nouvelle cuisine's finest ingredients, California's laid-back aesthetic—into a Dupont Circle townhome. The American palate has evolved since then, and Pastan has

maintained his well-edited vision. My recent dinner at his now-23-year-old experiment shows why Obelisk has survived five administrations ranked among DC's best.

The 30-seat dining room is tiny and efficient, but with the Italian magic that touches everything you eat, Obelisk's tables seem to grow to fit its antipasti parade that precede your four-course prix-fixe meal. A generous plate of creamy burrata doused in fruity olive oil kicks off the feast on a cloud.

And then it's gargati with polpettine for my primi. Translation: small pasta tubes with tiny heavenly meatballs for my first course. Perfectly pairing pasta with sauce is a tricky art. Gargati's thick grooves capture the silky tomatoes-in-season sauce and its al dente bite contrasts with meltingly CONTINUED...

What the stars mean: ★ = fair, some noteworthy qualities; ★★ = good, above average; ★★★ = very good, well above norm; ★★★★★ = excellent, among the area's best; ★★★★★★ = world-class, extraordinary in every detail. Reviews are based on multiple visits. Ratings reflect the reviewer's overall reaction to food, ambiance and service.

Obelisk

RATING: ★★★★★
2029 P St., NW,
202.872.1180

THE SCENE *The platonic form of approachable fine dining.*

Your server knows as much about the dishes as the chef.

WHO'S THERE *All restaurants in townhouses evoke intimacy, but Obelisk's*

take-your-time Italian procession takes about three hours, so everyone there truly wants to be dining with one another.

GOOD TO KNOW *Obelisk doesn't have a sign outside, just a nondescript metal cut-out of an obelisk, nor does the restaurant have a website.*

But it does have a truly "daily-changing" menu.

HOURS *Dinner Tues.-Sat., 6-10PM.*

PRICES *Chef's menu, Tues.-Thurs., \$70. Fri.-Sat., \$75.*

tender meatballs. The gargati is one of three primi choices (two pastas or a soup), together a tribute to the season's best basil, mushrooms and filet beans.

Lest I lose myself in a sea of remote Italian pasta shapes, a perfectly seared, crusty and juicy veal chop carved tableside is at once hearty and delicate. Ditto for my companion's flaky fluke swimming with clams, artichokes and pancetta; the dishes epitomize Obelisk's intense flavors without fussy aesthetic. Pastan's neat, mostly Italian wine list works efficient wonders.

Ah, the paradox of after-dinner cheese: love the choices, don't love creating my own pairing when knee-deep in conversation. Obelisk's limited menu (three choices per course) is an opportunity for a cheese plate well-paired

commands the conversation—it's not your noni's gnocchi. Made with pâte à choux, the dough used for éclairs, they're light and airy gnocchi puffs.

The carrot panna cotta's deep and sweet freshness would be satisfying served entirely on its own. Instead, smoked earthy pine nuts and crispy wild rice add bite and crunch, with a curry froth so light it might float off your plate. A fan of thinly sliced, three-day brined beef heart adds a resolving note and shows that Singhofen is a chef who takes dishes to the edge. Like Obelisk's cheese choices, the plate is both a cohesive part of your meal and a complete statement by itself.

Like Pastan at his début, Singhofen's opening represents a judicious edit



not only as an individual dish, but with the menu overall. After the simple, pure fish and veal, my palate embraced two complex Piedmont cheeses—one a dense, creamy roccchetta with a punchy trifecta of cow, sheep and goat milk. I had just enough appetite for a light hazelnut cake with raspberries and not-so-light vanilla ice cream. I swear it was a perfect meal, but I was proven wrong by a small plate of sweets, including a satisfying crunch of biscotti. Now it's a perfect meal.

I float down Obelisk's front stoop feeling like I should write a thank-you note. Just then I notice Eola across the street. With DC's rapid-fire openings, I haven't made it there yet. I remember that Pastan mentioned that Eola's chef/owner "reminds me of myself when I started out." I'm intrigued because adjacent restaurants conjure images of dueling truffle entrées. Who can argue with that?

Chef Daniel Singhofen is an unlikely newcomer. He's not famous, nor is he a chef who started out at another DC restaurant and was stolen by investors. He is a wildly talented 31-year-old guy with a family invested in the business and a fiancée who works the dining room when she's done with her day job. Eola, like Obelisk, has mom-and-pop feel with celebrity-chef quality.

Eola's menu, wine list, paint colors and furniture came from one guy's head. This was par for the course when Obelisk opened a quarter-century ago, but it's a rarity in today's conceptualized restaurant world. From the generously sized and spaced tables to the soft and lively jazz, it's a dinner party—though the people around you happen to be strangers. At some tony restaurants I feel like an eight-year-old in church—full of appropriate reverence but empty of rapture. People gleefully lay out cash but I leave discouraged that the bread and wine were the best part. At Eola, herb gnocchi complements rather than

EOLA *Left column:* A dish of scallops with pattypan squash and barley complements the sunny, elementally fresh feeling of this organic space. Desserts capture the season's buzz.

OBELISK *Right column:* Chef Peter Pastan's Italian dishes sparkle with innovation and flavor. A compressed fish roe and radish salad is as colorful as a boldly berry dessert.

of the best-of trends (the organ meat craze, farm-to-table). Singhofen takes advantage of Dupont Circle's FreshFarm Market even in his libations. Housemade junberry-cello is fine as an after-dinner drink, but it would be even better in a cocktail. Eola's sea bean-tini, a salty without brine delight, is the only martini variation I've enjoyed all year.

Singhofen's freedom from investors allows him to create what he wants. There's no chicken on the menu. "Simple roast chicken wouldn't fit in. So I tried a stuffed thigh, but no one ordered it," the chef says. Eola diners, it seems, know their way to the special stuff. Eola offers the requisite salad but I'm ordering the "seasonal composition," an artful palette of market vegetables.

The flip side to this approach is that not everything works. I'm pork exhausted, and the bacon-seared poundcake dessert comes off as dated for an innovative year-old restaurant (although my dining pal declared it "porktacular," so perhaps it's just my reviewer's ennui). Fried pig ears are crunchy light essence of pig (but you probably just said to yourself, "pig ears... you mean, like, the ears of a pig?") and there's precious little on the plate to balance out the duo of pork belly and shoulder. The non-bacon desserts impress—fried apple pie is a gourmet throwback to the fast-food staple.

A restaurant's breadbasket is usually instructive, and for Obelisk and Eola, it tells the whole story. Obelisk's snappy breadsticks and crusty, chewy loaves are perfection, served with butter that is an ideal balance of salty and sweet. Eola's loaf arrives warm, a bit too dense and overworked, but its thoughtful and comfortable goodness with lemon-rosemary butter wins me over. Restaurants, like all art forms, must stand the test of time to earn the title "classic." Obelisk is there. Eola has a running start. ■