

CRU: Donato Scotti Gets a Nose for Wine

Redwood City's gregarious culinary pioneer, Donato Scotti, is at it again. Venturing across the street from his downtown restaurant, Donato Enoteca, Scotti has opened a traditional European-style wine bar called CRU. A name traditionally reserved for high-end French wines (think Grand Cru or Premier Cru), the word has been adopted by the rest of the culinary world to reflect high value.

Located at 900 Middlefield Road in the Box building, the CRU wine bar is casual but not unrefined, an intentionally protean experience. Want a glass of wine before hopping on the train? Head to CRU. Looking to linger and have a bite? Pair that wine with a pizza al taglio, some house-cured charcuterie, and a tapas or two. Or maybe a bottle of wine and some artisanal coffee beans are needed, perhaps for a nice night at home or a hostess gift. CRU sells them too.

"We knew we wanted to expand -- in company and concept," Scotti said, explaining how he and sommelier business partner Eric Lecours came to open a second, albeit different, restaurant almost directly across the street from their first. "We thought, why go anywhere else? This is home. We wanted to offer downtown another option, something completely different than what is available down here."

At CRU, customers can grab coffee or a croissant in the morning or a sandwich at lunch, Scotti said. "And then at 3 p.m., we do the Cinderella thing, and it's wine, beer, tapas and pizza." Knowing that the main focus would be wine, Scotti and Lecours envisioned CRU as a place to dis-



cover bottles and varietals not found on grocery store shelves. "We're not trying to compete with K&L or BevMo," Scotti explained, "And it's not that it has to be a pricey bottle of wine, just not something that you would find at Whole Foods or Safeway."

The lunch menu is fairly straightforward: There are salads, like Scotti's take on tuna nicoise, and sandwiches piled with house-cured pastrami or roasted vegetables and smoked mozzarella. It's the "Cinderella moment" -- the after 3 p.m. menu -- that shifts the focus to small plates. Scotti wanted customers to easily mix and match the international selection of meats, cheeses and tapas with the wine.

"It all comes together at the table," he said. "I didn't want to do something where you have the Burgundy dishes that go with the Burgundy wines. Here, you could have mussels with butter and garlic like in the south of France, a plate of prosciutto like you would in Parma (Italy), and then a plate of boquerones (white anchovies) like in Spain, and all with a glass of champagne."

Another item that can be thrown into Scotti's mix-and-match vision is the pizza al taglio. A specific type of pizza popular in Rome, it is smaller than the average pie

and served square. But what makes the pizza special is the dough, which uses three Italian imported flours: a pizza flour, an ancient primitivo flour, and farro flour. The dough is left to rise for an incredible 72 hours before it's baked (far longer than a typical one-hour rise). The long wait results in a fluffy, lighter-than-air dough that is then topped with savory combinations like burrata and melt-in-

the mouth slices of Scotti's house-cured, Italian-style ham.

As with the pizza, there is a story behind CRU's coffee. Imported from Italy, the beans are sourced by a meticulous coffee-roaster known for his colorful, head-to-toe Gucci ensembles and flair for dramatics. "These coffees," said Scotti, "they are the most sought after in Europe. He has a list of hundreds of people waiting, but he won't take any more customers." There is a certain pressure that comes with being on the coveted list. "He'll drop (someone) because he doesn't like how they make his coffee," Scotti explained, before adding with a chuckle, "he's crazy, I tell you." Maintaining the whims of the coffee-roaster is worth it to Scotti though. One smooth sip of a velvety espresso makes that clear. "I feel like a drug pusher, I tell people (to) just try the coffee. I know they'll be coming back for more."

CRU is Scotti and Lecours's third Bay Area eatery (the other is Desco in Oakland). Operating three restaurants is no easy feat, but Scotti seems to take it all in stride. Shrugging his shoulders, he says, "My grandfather used to say to me, 'You want a bike, now you pedal.'" It may be at fever pitch, but Scotti is definitely pedaling. **C**