



Weekend Dining at Big Oli, Neighborhood Food Hall, Dubai Motor City

The dream of a talented, passionate and humble Italian Chef is coming true with the opening of Big Oli in Dubai.

A small food outlet - not much more than a one-room open kitchen in a crowded food hall - but the authenticity and quality of both ingredients and flavors are surprising, like a soprano opera star who suddenly starts singing in a teen grunge band: far above and beyond the appearances!





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Indeed, expectations were exceeded by miles, and Big Oli delivers a knock-out punch to much richer and elaborate “Italian” restaurants in Dubai... and the real beauty of this David-Goliath moment is in the simplicity of just flour, eggs, and water: and a heart so big I don’t know how it fits into a Chef’s apron.

Actually, Big Oli is a play on the name of a regional pasta - bigoli - and every morning the good Chef Fabio Longhi makes a fresh batch of them by hand, following the true and tried recipes of *Mamma, Nonna, Bisnonna*, and generations of Italians before.

OK, and pinches of little family secret know-hows here and there!





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The result is two kinds of bigoli pasta, one regular and the other with squid ink, giving it its characteristic black color.

And this fresh pasta, at the moment you order, Chef Fabio and his crew transform on the spot: into the boiling water, cooked a little longer than the regular pasta, as bigoli are quite thick and benefit from a longer cooking time - we're talking a few minutes anyways, as the pasta is super-fresh!

And your choice of sauces are waiting...



Above, the Cacio e Pepe, and Ragu all'Anatra...

I wanted to taste the first because, although one of the oldest and simplest Italian pasta dishes, it is also one of the most difficult to get perfectly right!

And the second - the duck - because it is not easy to find a proper Italian duck sauce in Dubai, nor outside of Italy, actually. It is similar to the ubiquitous Bolognese, but the refinement of the duck meat gives it quite a

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special twist.

Besides, its rarity is understandable, even within Italy, as it is a regional speciality from the north, from the wetlands created by the rivers descending the Alps and percolating into the Adriatic, where there are... yes, ducks!



You see Chef Fabio at work, and he is totally focused - tasting here, checking there.

And as you take your first bite, you realize this is probably the best bigoli you're ever going to taste in your life!

Life's like that... best fresh pasta you'll taste in Dubai, and it is served in a cardboard bowl, in what can only politely be described as a "food hall" since it seems more the reborn loading dock of a warehouse - even though, it must be said that Chef Fabio's open kitchen was noticeably spotless and ship-shape in every detail.

In fact, I'll go as far to say that the amazement of tasting such fantastic authentic pasta, within the Neighborhood Food Hall, is an integral part of the experience - almost a counter-cultural expression, like graffiti on a run-down building by acclaimed artist Banksy. You don't expect it, and it's out of place, and so its value is even more!

It's the counter-cool *zeitgeist* of urban cooking!

Dear Neighborhood Food Hall people - bring in a troupe of cutting edge graffiti artists and let them run wild?





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In any case, the creamy, cheesy Cacio e Pepe destroys all interference from the environment - it is perfect!

You could be sitting in Piazza San Marco, directly in the center of Venice, eating Big Oli's bigoli, and still your eyes would be closed and ears un-hearing, as your sensory brain is totally overwhelmed with gastronomical pleasure.

Served piping hot, the freshness and texture of the bigoli just dance on your tongue, fully saturating the taste buds.

It's incredible how such a simple dish can be wonderful and even more satisfying than the most complicated fine-dining dish!

And then the duck takes over, and brings you to Italian culinary paradise...





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“Yes, and yes!” you exclaim, “I had a similar dish when I visited Venice!”

And that might be true - the region is correct - but as good and fresh as Big Oli’s homemade pasta, I’m honestly sure you could not find in UAE... except at Big Oli.

Truly we enjoyed fresh pasta masterpieces at a genuine gourmet level at Big Oli - and I’m Italian!

And for the Italians in UAE, carissimi, belli e brutti - tutti da Fabio, a provare questi bigoli, e poi mi direte che ne pensate, e se, almeno per un istante, non vi siete trovati a casa...





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Incredibly, within the limited outlet space, Big Oli also installed a professional pizza oven!

We had to try...





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... and we were rewarded with a fabulous truffle pizza!

The crust exceptional, and the pizza was garnished with a rain of real truffle shavings!

(The usual “truffle oil” added commonly actually contains no real truffles.)

But there was more to this pizza than the delicious foam of fresh cheese - a deeper, more complex aroma teased the palate, and it was the creative addition of a few drops of extremely high quality vinegar!



It might sound strange to celebrate a sprinkling of vinegar on a pizza, but in reality it was a touch of genius - one that a thinking, experimenting, innovating Chef might apply - and it turned an already exceptional pizza into a total universe of yum unto itself!

You see, the acidic undertone plays well and cuts through the rich creaminess of the cheese, and in turn exhales the earthy flavor of the truffles!

And so our good Chef delves deep into the alchemy of applying contrasting and complementary tastes and aromas, indicating a *savoir faire* above and beyond, and ultimately in line with a lifetime passion behind cooking fire.

Bravo, Chef Fabio!



Indeed, you might notice the same notes of acidity in the Sangria drink, also prepared in-house at Big Oli... presented alongside a lively trio of fresh juices.



The menu proposes quite a variety of sauces to accompany the fresh bigoli, and I look forward to return and try them all - starting from the signature Squid Ink!



And I'll bet Chef Fabio also makes his pesto fresh... so that's on the must-try list as well!

In fact, from today on, the algorithm in my brain is set:
[fresh pasta in Dubai = Big Oli!]

And so, whether enjoyed within the Neighborhood Food Hall, or perhaps delivered to the comfort of your own home, the newly-opened Big Oli smashes open an exceptional window into a regional Italian culinary celebration of exquisite fresh pasta dishes - and specifically, the world of homemade bigoli - with also exciting options in pizzas and gourmet juices, in Dubai Motor City.