

Boston

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FOOD+DRINK INSIDE DISH

Made to Order

Three years of planning, two trips to Italy, a dozen sit-down tastings, and innumerable drafts. Writing a great menu takes more work than you might imagine. **By Jane Black**

While most of us think of a menu as a simple list of appetizers, entrées, and desserts, restaurateurs see a one-page business plan: the outline of their vision and a way to keep costs on track. That can mean all kinds of compromises. Industry veterans Michela Larson and Gary Sullivan discussed the first draft of the menu for Rocca, their new restaurant opening in the South End later this month, back in 2004. Since then,

the menu has evolved to accommodate ingredient availability, chef Tom Fosnot's style, and logistical realities. (Some dishes, no matter how tasty, just aren't practical when you're cooking for 200.) As you'll see, there's a reason for every item—and every price.

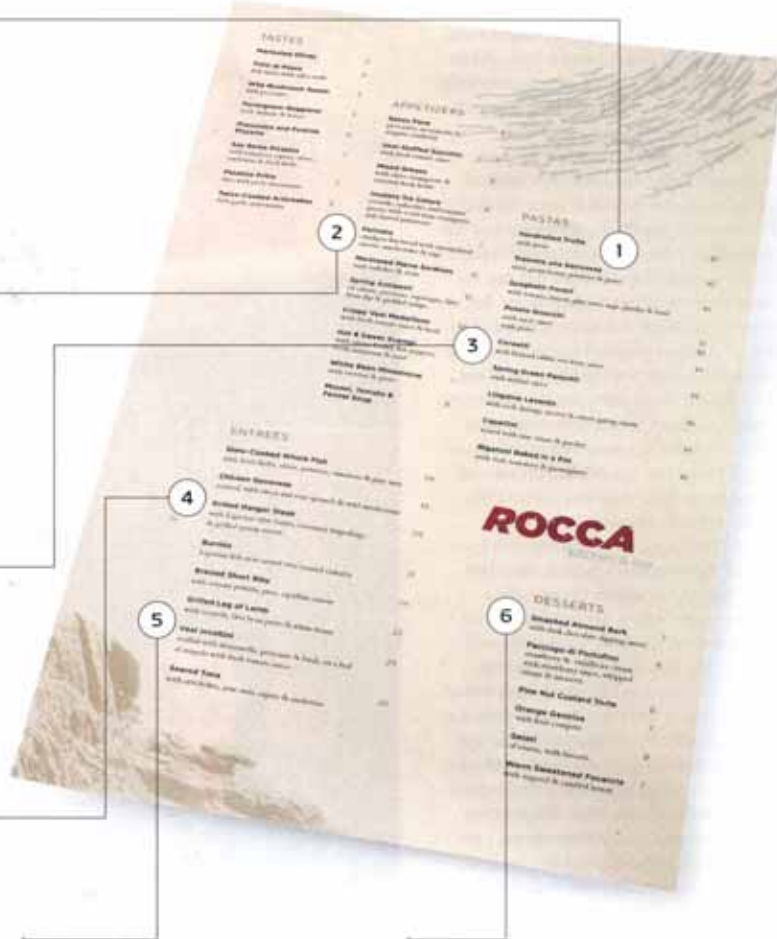
Rocca, 500 Harrison St., Boston, 617-451-5151, rocaboston.com.

1. Handrolled trofie with pesto, \$10
The ingredients don't cost much, but the dish itself is ultra-labor-intensive. The pasta, just flour and water, is shaped by hand and the pesto made the old-fashioned way with a mortar and pestle, giving it a creamier texture. To keep prices down—and the chef sane—the team decided to serve a 3-ounce portion rather than the more common 5-ounce bowl. This also lets diners either make a light meal of the *trofie* or pair it with an entrée.

2. Farinata with caramelized onions, mushrooms, and sage, \$7
During one trip to Italy, Larson and Sullivan fell in love with Liguria's *farinata*, a flatbread made of chickpea flour that's served as a snack, like focaccia. As soon as they tasted it, the pair purchased several of the round, heavy copper pans used to make the bread—and an extra suitcase to carry them home. At Rocca, *farinata* is upgraded from snack to appetizer, and accompanied by lightly dressed salad.

3. Corzetti with braised rabbit-red wine sauce, \$14
They eat a lot of rabbit in Liguria. "It sounds great. And it tastes great. But here in Boston, it just doesn't sell," says chef Fosnot. To stay true to the regional cuisine, he braises rabbit in red wine to create a sauce for traditional *corzetti*, coin-size pasta stamped with a wooden mold. (Larson and Sullivan had their "Rocca" stamp handmade in the Ligurian town of Chiavari.)

4. Grilled hanger steak with Ligurian olive butter and rosemary fingerling potatoes, \$24
"Rule of thumb for restaurants: You gotta have a steak," says Sullivan. But steak presented some difficulties. First, it's not a traditional food in Liguria, where stewed veal and beef cheeks are the staple proteins. And second, it's not cheap, and the Rocca team had committed to a \$25 ceiling. They solved the authenticity issue by preparing a steak with Ligurian ingredients: olives in a compound butter and roasted potatoes with lots of herbs. For price, they chose hanger steak, which goes for just \$4.50 to \$5.50 per pound, versus \$17 to \$18 for filet mignon and \$6.95 to \$7.95 for the more popular but less tender flank steak.



5. Veal involtini with mozzarella, prosciutto, and basil, \$24
The classic Ligurian version calls for stuffing veal with bread crumbs, prosciutto, egg, and more veal, then braising it all in tomato sauce. Fosnot's verdict: "It's heavy, incredibly expensive to make, and you'd only think it was really good if you'd been in prison for a few years." Fosnot's solution: Pound the veal thin, stuff it with three simple ingredients, then serve it atop a bed of arugula.

6. Smashed almond bark with dark chocolate dipping sauce, \$7
When Larson and Sullivan had this dessert at a smart restaurant in Milan, "it was so good we didn't care whether it was from Liguria," says Larson with a laugh. They had no recipe, though, so they had to enlist Fosnot's wife, Ruth Anne Adams (formerly of Casablanca), to develop one for the crisp, meringue-like bark. The plate comes with enough to share—and a bowl of thick molten chocolate.