

Grassa in Vancouver worth the wait

At last, we don't have to drive across the river to get this restaurant's signature fresh, velvety pasta

By Rachel Pinsky, for The Columbian

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Grassa recently opened on Vancouver's waterfront. (Photos by Rachel Pinsky for The Columbian)

Grassa, a casual spot known for fresh pasta doused in flavor-packed sauces, just opened on Vancouver's waterfront.

Before the pandemic, rumors swirled that the new Grassa location was in the works. Then I heard it was on hold. After riding this pasta roller coaster for the past two years, I'm glad Grassa

finally reached its destination at the waterfront. Based on a recent visit, it was worth the bumpy ride.

The punk-rock vibe that clung to the edges of Portland's Grassa outposts is fainter at this new location, limited to the large tattoo-art painting of the chain's eagle logo on the interior and exterior. The vast open space mimics the aesthetic of Grassa's signature pasta dishes. Floor-to-ceiling windows and white tiles give the impression of a large ceramic bowl. Lush green plants dot the perimeter like bits of parsley scattered over pasta.

I didn't encounter a line when I visited on a recent Tuesday at lunch, but many of the tables were taken both indoors and outdoors. Grassa offers counter service, with orders taken at the front and then delivered to the table. Reservations aren't accepted. The menu (posted on the back wall behind the register) lists pasta (\$9-\$17), salads, meatballs, garlic bread and fritto misto (\$5-\$15), as well as beer (\$6), wine (\$9-\$14 per glass, carafes for \$15-\$36) and cocktails (\$8-\$11).

For starters, I ordered the Caesar salad (\$10), Grassa meatballs (\$8) and garlic bread (\$5). Narrowing down my pasta order was difficult. After some thought, I chose the carbonara (\$15), rigatoni with Sunday pork ragu (\$13) and fusilli alla vodka (\$13) to get a taste of different shapes and sauces. I was also interested in pork belly mac and cheese with jalapenos and cornbread crumbs, but that will have to wait for my next visit.

DINING - OUT GUIDE

GRASSA

Where: 780 Waterfront Way, Vancouver

Hours: 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. daily

Contact: 360-360-4687; grassapdx.com

Health score: Grassa had yet to receive an initial inspection at press time. Zero is a perfect score, and Clark County Public Health closes restaurants with a score of 100 or higher. For more information, call 360-397-8428.

A glass of the house red (Coopers Hall, Cascade Red, \$9) seemed like just the thing to take the edge off a hectic Tuesday and meld with the pasta. This was a wise choice. Coopers Hall in Portland blends its Cascade Red two to three times a year with Pacific Northwest-grown grapes from places like the Columbia Valley in Washington and the Rogue Valley in Oregon. It reminded me of the house wine found at restaurants in Rome — glass carafes of unlabeled, well-balanced red wine with the right dashes of acid and fruit to whet the appetite.

Two generous wedges of crusty artisan bread soaked with garlic and butter arrived in a white paper bag. A trio of palm-sized meatballs sat in a small rectangular iron skillet in a pool of red sauce dusted with shredded Parmesan cheese and bits of chopped parsley.

The other food came in large, white, oval ceramic bowls that made bright colors pop. Lemon slices and whole anchovies dotted the crisp torn romaine leaves drizzled with creamy dressing in the Caesar salad. My favorite of the trio of pastas was the fusilli. The spices in the Italian sausage

and the heat of the crushed red pepper gave deep flavor to the red sauce. All the fresh pasta was boiled to a velvety tenderness.

For the carbonara, a solid fried egg rested on top of the tangle of thick, long bucatini noodles. It created an interesting visual effect, but this dish is typically made by pouring a beaten raw egg over hot pasta along with a blizzard of grated Pecorino Romano, Parmigiano-Reggiano or both, as well as pasta water, coating the long pasta in a velvety sauce. I prefer that method. I wasn't sure what to do with the wobbly egg hat on top of the mountain of pasta, although the bits of pancetta did give the dish the effect of a bacon-and-eggs breakfast.

Was Grassa worth the wait? Yes, for a couple of reasons. There are few things in life as good as sipping a crisp red wine while eating a large bowl of well-prepared pasta and gazing at the Columbia River. As winter creeps in, I look forward to warming my face with steamy bowls of spaghetti, agnolotti and rigatoni.

If a place like Grassa can make it here, that might encourage more Portland or Portland-caliber restaurants to open in Vancouver. By Portland-caliber, I mean places that could open in Portland because of the quality of the experience they offer but intentionally choose Vancouver like Elements, Little Conejo, Smokin' Oak, Rally Pizza, Amaro's Table, The Grocery and Slow Fox Chili. Vancouver has plenty of room for places serving destination-level meals. Like many of my neighbors, I'd rather not drive across the river to try them.

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