



UNCLE NICKY'S

The simple menu shines at this casual Hyde Park hangout modeled on Northern Italy's all-day cafes.

BY JOLÈNE M. BOUCHON

When feeling particularly philosophical about parenting, my mom would say, "Wherever you go, there you are." It was as much a gentle admonishment—*remember yourself, young lady*—as it was an encouragement. No matter what life threw, how far I traveled, and how fancy (I thought) I'd gotten, I'd always be, essentially, me. Things change, but the center holds.

As Austin grows—and grows ever more fabulous—Mom's words come to mind. Yes, we've got celebrities in residence and super-fancy shops and bars and you-name-its. But no matter how many towers rise and commuters cram onto our roadways, Austin is still a laid-back little town at heart.

Happily, that truth is being better



reflected in our dining scene. Last year saw new restaurants take a tack toward the easygoing, even if they betrayed some of the worldlier polish that comes with being an "it" city. Don't get me wrong: Many Austinites adore the wider culinary variety and tucking in at luxe restaurants, myself included. But when it comes down to it, we always come back to the patio-hanging ethos that defines us. Friendly, uncomplicated, casual. It's not just what we want; it's who we are.

Uncle Nicky's, which took over the former Dolce Vita spot in Hyde Park, is one of the newer contenders in this category. Modeled on Northern Italy's all-day cafes, it's an early-to-late, come-as-you-are spot that's as much sandwich and snack shop as it is bar and gelateria. As per its roots, the menu is simple, featuring dishes focused on super fresh, well-curated ingredients, with an almost exclusively Italian roster of drinks, including low-ABV Campari-based cocktails. The Uncle Nicky's Spritz, a sprightly concoction of gin, prosecco, and grapefruit cordial, is perfect for whiling away a sunny afternoon. Try one of their three takes on the Negroni if you want a bit more punch.

The space is as diminutive as it ever was, but brighter and fresher with creamy white walls and muted blue accents. You may not

see an open seat right away, but give it a minute. Whether at the tables inside or on the patio, the stand-up bar, or the little counter tucked into the front corner, there's space to be found. The atmosphere is not a facsimile of Italy's creaky Old-World charm, but rather a bit of old country mixed with a casual, cheeky take that's all Austin.

The team behind Uncle Nicky's reads like a roll call of the city's culinary all-stars. Nicholas Yanes (Juniper), Travis Tober (Nickel City), and brothers Brandon and Zane Hunt (Nickel City and Via 313) own it, while culinary operations are led by former Juniper chef de tournant, Nick Intonti. Matthew Bolick (Wright Bros. Brew & Brew and Better Half) oversees the coffee program, while Juniper's pastry chef Derrick Flynn turns out superb breads, pastries, and gelato.

With this pedigree, it's almost redundant to say the food is good. But it really is. True to its Italian roots, it's simple in approach, relying on ultra-fresh ingredients and a small menu that lets the chefs do a few things very well. Uncle Nicky's menu is built around antipasti and pane tostato (basically, open-faced toasts) with a selection of salads and sandwiches. I had to just about fight my son for the last bite of the sardines: Served in

the tin, a bright salsa verde cuts through the fish's oily brine, and when paired with the accompanying Ritz crackers, it makes for a salty-rich bite with just enough tang. It's heaven. Another heavenly item is the tender pork meatballs in a marsala cream sauce, augmented by salty pecorino. The baccala mantecato tostato felt substantial and savory, the mellow whipped salt cod punctuated by Kalamata olives. I didn't enjoy my 'Njuda and gorgonzola tostato as much as I'd hoped I would, as gorgonzola's astrigent funk overpowered the spicy flavor that I so love in the spreadable sausage that's a Calabrian specialty. But we did enjoy the different take on the ubiquitous kale salad, tossed with toasted pine nuts, pecorino, and

Uncle Nicky's

★★★★★

FOOD

★★★★★

ATMOSPHERE

★★★★★

SERVICE

★★★★★

VALUE

★★★★★

CONTACT:
4222 Duval St.
(512) 650-8373
unclenickys.com

an earthy truffle honey that brings out its sweeter side.

Excellent house-made baked goods—including all the breads—are a tempting choice for dessert or breakfast. For a savory start to the day, try a Taylor Ham, egg, and cheese sandwich. It was hard for me to pass up a cream-filled bombolini (I didn't), though I was sorely tempted by the cruller, its crisped glazed ridges a siren song. As with Dolce Vita, Uncle Nicky's has a rotating handful of gelato flavors. My son tore

into a cup of not-too-cloying birthday cake gelato, silent and purposeful—a good sign—as did I with my cup of pecan brown butter, declaring, "This is so good, it's stupid!" Indeed, the toasty, caramelized flavor was the closest I've come to recapturing that

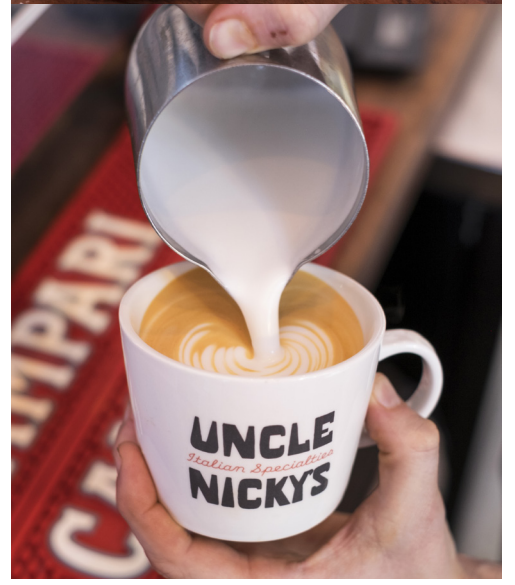
first bite of burnt sugar gelato on my first trip to Venice. (Now if they could re-create the *seadas* gelato I had at Fatamorgana in Rome, I'd be much obliged.)

If I have one real complaint, the portion sizes are small. Yes, that is true to Italian style, but I found it took quite a lot to sate my active little family. It was no chore to add on a few more dishes, mind you, as each new bite was delightful. Plus, it gives you more time to enjoy that Austin patio life. **AW**



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: housemade crullers; steamed milk poured into a latte; sardines with Ritz crackers and salsa verde.

OPPOSITE PAGE, FROM LEFT: birthday cake gelato; the full bar and service counter at Uncle Nicky's.



IT'S A BIT OF OLD COUNTRY MIXED WITH A CASUAL, CHEEKY TAKE THAT'S ALL AUSTIN.

PHOTOS BY DIMITRI STASZEWSKI