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# Trend for the 'TENS

Playboy Club in Las Vegas shows off the new shot-ready liqueur HARLEM.

## HARLEM

*The Shot Heard  
'Round The World*

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CARMEN RODRIGUEZ  
LANGDON FLYNN  
2760 LAKE SAHARA DR STE 100  
LAS VEGAS NV 89117-3438

PHOTO: [unreadable]

# Going Italian in H-Town

VALENTINO'S THIRD LOCATION BOOSTS HOUSTON'S  
REPUTATION AS A TRUE DINING DESTINATION

by Anthony Head / photos by Kirk Weddle



*Austin-based Anthony Head reports regularly from around the Lone Star State.*

**Can Chef Cunningham West's modern Italian cuisine match up to Valentino's wine reputation?**

I don't know if Houston will ever be known for eggplant Parmesan, but if it does, the benchmark will have been prepared at Valentino. It's the best I've ever had, and I didn't even realize I was keeping track of such things until just now.

During my meal, Piero Selvaggio sat down at the table. He's co-owner of the Valentino concept, including the one at Las Vegas's Venetian Hotel and the original location in Santa Monica, California. The Houston version, which is really two restaurants, opened last September, tucked alongside the funky, elegant Hotel Derek, and there is lots of color and shine to both properties. My first question: Why Houston?

"Houston is a candy store for wines. Here I think there is real demand, so we've put together already quite a decent wine list," Piero replied with sincerity. The list already abounds with gems from Italy and California, but he's just getting started with it. "We will definitely have an exciting wine program. But a great wine list happens in years. You have to have verticals and vintages and variety. You have to be sensitive to the responses you get from your customers."

My response was that the Stoneleigh '08 Pinot Noir from New Zealand went perfectly with the eggplant. That's when Piero put all his cards on the table: "Wine is very dear to me. I have two restaurants with Grand Awards by *Wine Spectator*. I want to have three. So that is going to be the chapter I work on personally, to make sure number three can happen here in a couple of years."

I could end right here because, knowing Piero (and I hardly do), he'll have his third Grand in good time. And I'm pretty sure when that happens, Houston will have already developed quite a fondness for Chef Cunninghame West. He's neither Texan nor Italian, but in the end none of that matters a bit: West knows how to cook a damn good eggplant. And also, having worked in the Las Vegas Valentino for about five years, he's well aware of Piero's devotion to wine. "I've seen him buzz through a distributor's list, picking two cases of this and one case of that and a pallet of that," recalls the chef. "We had 240 wines when we opened, but Piero's been adding to that so quickly and so regularly."

West does the same thing with the menus, originally

developed by co-owner and Executive Chef Luciano Pellegrini. West adds to them regularly, with contemporary Italian dishes and fresh flavors building on one another. But as I said before, the space is actually two restaurants, the fine-dining Valentino in back and the bright and casual Vin Bar up front. West cooks for both, but he has the most freedom with Vin Bar's *crudo* selections.

I think it's safe to say that most Houstonians have the pleasure of discovering *crudo* bars still waiting in their

futures. The tapas-style dishes are already popular in Los Angeles, where Valentino helped introduce the country to the concept of the Italian raw bar. Among West's offerings are blood orange lobster tail with baby arugula and passion fruit white tuna with fennel. (Such skill clearly influences West's super-thin-sliced treatment of the eggplant.)

There are also varieties of Old World cured meats and 16 cheeses from all over. The four-cheese combo, West says, is the number-one seller. He also explains that since he's always updating the menus to keep things fresh by market and season, he has never bothered developing a signature dish. "No such thing as a signature dish for me. It's like asking an artist, 'What's your favorite painting?'"

I can say that West's

buffalo tenderloin with *vincotto*, an intense grape-must reduction, gets a lot of press coverage. And I adored the pasta pocket filled with earthy sautéed mushrooms. He says both dishes are good examples of his overall philosophy, which includes never wasting flavor and remembering that a beautiful dish must also eat well.

With dinner over and Piero off to greet more guests, I was convinced West's food will rise and fill out just as superbly as Valentino's wine list. That's when I momentarily lost my bearings. Within the last couple of years, Houston has welcomed numerous places—Bedford, Voice at the Hotel Icon, RDG + Bar Annie, for example—that adhere to similar standards of excellent food and wine. Suddenly, H-Town has been transformed into one of those exciting dining destinations. I had a Jack Rocks at the Vin Bar while recalling the delicious eggplant dish from earlier in the evening, and I thought to myself, "Just what the heck is happening to Houston?" ■



Crudo selections from Valentino's Vin Bar.