



(Clockwise from top left) Bencotto brings sophistication to San Diego's Little Italy, with dishes such as *tortino di cavolfiore* (pureed cauliflower tart), *bresaola* and arugula salad, and *crespelle alla Genovese* (crepes with Fontina cheese, pesto, and green beans).

## Bencotto

750 W. Fir Street, San Diego

(619) 450-4786; [lovebencotto.com](http://lovebencotto.com)

### SETTING:

Dramatic concrete-and-glass interior

### SERVICE:

Friendly and efficient, but plan on taking your time

### BEST DISHES:

*Tortino di cavolfiore*; *bresaola* and arugula salad; *crespelle alla Genovese*

### DINNER PRICES:

Starters, \$8–\$12  
entrées, \$12–\$19  
desserts, \$7

Three little words: *tortino di cavolfiore*. Memorize this octet of savory syllables and recite them to the server at Bencotto, a truly fine new Italian restaurant in the heart of San Diego's bustling Little Italy. The result will be a light-as-air tart filled with pureed cauliflower and doused with a musky, unforgettable Parmigiano cheese. Proprietors Guido Nistri, Valentina di Pietro, and Patrick and Virginia Daniels bring Northern Italian cuisine of uncompromising quality to a street famous for giant pizzas and platters of spaghetti. Chef Fabrizio Cavallini often retreats to his private "pasta laboratory" to hand-cut luscious tagliatelle and score gnocchi one by one with a fork, so that the tender dumplings will hold more sauce.

Housed in The Q, a dramatic six-story glass structure that redefines the Little Italy skyline, the two-story Bencotto is a dream for geometricians, with bold cubes and rectangles of

space. Its hard surfaces might make the place too noisy for some, but most find it lively; floral arrangements smooth the stark interior.

The food at *la cucina Bencotto* takes time, but everything is worth the wait. Open with a basket of *gnocco fritto*, tasty puffs of fried pasta dough, or *tigella*, miniature breads that nicely accompany a grand assortment of Italian cured meats. Starters shine, like the baked, breaded meatballs served with spicy marinara sauce and the lovely tumble of arugula and *bresaola* (papery slices of cured beef) with Parmigiano shavings and lemon-basil dressing.

The few formal entrées include rich beef stew with polenta, but expect even more satisfaction from the *crespelle alla Genovese*, a pile of crepes stuffed with Fontina cheese and layered with pesto and green beans. You can pair house-made pastas with a choice of eight sauces; try matching tagliatelle with a creamy sauce of walnuts and Gorgonzola, or *mezzi rigatoni* with spicy pancetta sauce. Irregularly shaped almond cookies called *sbrisolona* end the proceedings more than happily.

—David Nelson