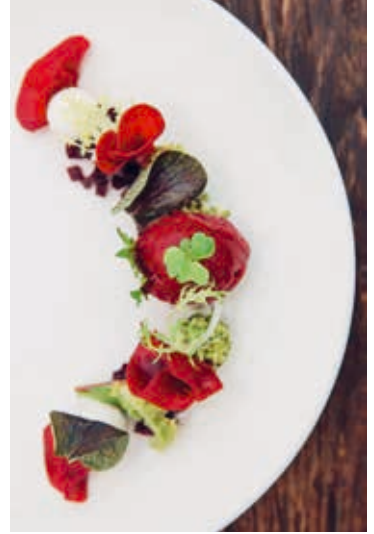


Luca Appino

This energetic chef's Italian cuisine is both contemporary and refined



During the lunch rush at **La Bottega di Luca** (on Sukhumvit Soi 49), Chef **Luca Appino** bounces between tables greeting regulars, belting out jokes, and making sure everything is just right. The personality of the Italian-born restaurateur is just as memorable as the plates of food coming out of the kitchen, and in just 13 years both have managed to make a major mark on Bangkok's dining scene.

His initial introduction to Asia was the result of being in the right place at the right time. Back in Italy, in 2004, he overheard someone complain to their friend that they needed to find a chef to send to Bangkok to help open **Enoteca** (on Sukhumvit Soi 27). His success since then hasn't been an accident, accomplishing his dream of having his own restaurant at just 27 years old in 2008 with the opening of **La Bottega di Luca**, before going on to collaborate in other well-loved Bangkok institutions like **Vesper**, **Pizza Massilia**, and **il Fumo**. Though he's had to step out of the kitchen and away from cooking to run these different ventures, he shrugs off the label of restaurateur, declaring that he's more

of a coach, encouraging and enhancing the talents of those around him.

"I give the chefs all the freedom, they give me their ideas," he says eagerly, explaining that he also spends two months a year exploring Italy in search of high quality ingredients requested by his chefs, sourcing from and working with over a dozen small, often family-run, producers. Menus are adjusted based on the availability of quality ingredients, and he helps the chefs as they finalize their recipes.

"The base [of our dishes comes] from historic and traditional recipes, but we modify, upgrade, and make our cuisine contemporary," he says of the menu at **La Bottega**.

If you're looking for an example, try the **Beetroot and Goat Cheese Salad** (B520), a classic appetizer updated with the addition of beetroot sorbet and edible leaves that creates a textured dish which is both familiar and fresh. The **Crepes Brûlée** (B380), cylinders of lemon curd wrapped in a brûléed crepe served with crumbled mint and a red fruit sauce, also hits comfortably familiar flavours while offering unexpected combinations that are what set a meal here apart.

While he's certainly at the top of the food chain in Bangkok's Italian fine dining scene, and takes clear pride in his achievements, Luca is also incredibly generous when praising the work of other chefs, and he's eager to see how their talents will continue to enhance Italian cuisine, especially in the age of Michelin.

"Bangkok is the door to Southeast Asia" he explains, clearly besotted with his adopted city which he says is "less strangled by" expensive overhead costs and offers better access to fresh imported produce—making it easier for new restaurants to experiment and flourish. He adds that the arrival of the **Michelin Guide** will "officially [put Bangkok] in the middle of the international culinary gourmet scene".

With no shortage of new projects, including a newly launched pasta delivery venture called **Pasta.go**, Luca is finding plenty of ways to harness his love of food and Italian fare. With a wink he promises that even more is set to come.

INTERVIEW BY MICAELA MARINI HIGGS

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