

Southern Italian comfort food

Le Cucine Mandarosso offers quality at an economic price near the Palau

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● Le Cucine Mandarosso opened about four months ago just a stone's throw from the Palau de Musica. The fare is a minor encyclopedia of southern Italian delivered as dressed-down comfort food.

Lunch and dinner draw on regional cuisine from Naples to Sicily. The chalkboard menu changes daily; head chef, the amiable Pietro Leowetti, is working 13-hour days to keep offerings varied. He conceives menus around midnight with his small team and visits the markets in the mornings. What's

not available locally is imported, with Leowetti's mother providing a once-a-month hookup from their native Campania and making a life-changing torta di ricotta while she's in town.

The rear pea-green dining room is studded with smart vintage lamps and a Fiat refrigerator that would be any designer's envy. Out front, a collection of tables are rowed village-bar style, and coffee, Setaro pasta and canned specialties are stacked to the ceiling. A first lunch of *penne* in béchamel, mozzarella and field peas gave me a welcome break from my

workaday menus. This was soon after opening, when a few ruffles in service – no bread, for example – had to be worked out.

A return dinner visit was flawless. My *calamarata* was swimming in piquant cherry tomatoes and hunks of monkfish. There was bread aplenty, and a friend and I shared a bottle of Issa. Our starter, an antipasti plate, could have stood alone.

Propelling Mandarosso from attractive to unmissable is the long Sunday aperitivo menu, a €7 post-beach cavalcade of serve-yourself small plates of baked pastas, *pescaditos*, *penne*



The Sunday aperitivo menu: a €7 cavalcade of Italian delicacies/Z.S.

with black olives, vinegared artichokes, an apricot tart and several cheese cakes. Real jewels will emerge, like the buffalo mozzarella that one out-of-town visi-

tor, damning his lactose intolerance, went ahead with anyway – a move he didn't regret. Cap off the weekend with three fingers of Sambuco and a shot of Illy.