



» Bon Appétit

Trattoria Brunos

210 W. Birch Street, Brea

By Ann Wycoff | Photo by Lori Anderson

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Diners pack the house for rustic cooking with simple flavors at Trattoria Brunos in Brea.

Offerings include Nonna Maria's meatballs.

Info: Sundays and Tuesdays–Thursdays, 4–9:30 p.m.; Fridays–Saturdays, 4–11:30 p.m. 1-714-257-1000

Setting: Exposed brick, dark woods, moody lighting, gondola prow ornament

Service: Affable, attentive, and enthusiastic

Best Dishes: *Mozzarella burrata*, *pappardelle Bruno*, *polpette*, *branzino*

Dinner prices: Appetizers, \$7–\$13; pastas, \$14–\$17; entrées, \$20–\$23; desserts, \$6

Brea's once sleepy downtown has undergone a renaissance, and its main artery, Birch Street, now pulses with energy. Leading the charge is **Trattoria Brunos**, an unexpected Italian gem featuring old-world cooking with simple flavors. Chef and co-owner Peter Serantoni's rustic cooking has roots in Venice, Italy, with recipes from his chef father, "Papa Bruno," and grandmother Maria. At first glance, the menu felt overly familiar, so I ordered the meatballs as a culinary litmus test. Two medium-sized fellas arrived in a dainty pool of fresh tomato sauce. In a bite, Nonna Maria's meatballs won me over—simple flavors, slow cooked, utterly fresh, and a perfect texture—a culinary harbinger of unexpected pleasures yet to come.

Next up was *arancini*, lightly fried risotto balls plump with ham and cheese, which succeeded as a tasty share. When the burrata and beet salad arrived a tad overchilled, we paused to enjoy our drinks, which included riffs on Italian classics, such as the Amalfi Spritz, a jazzed up Ketel One Citroen with basil, lemon, and Prosecco. Once the velvet-soft *burrata* relaxed at room temperature, it mingled better with the roasted beets, pistachios, arugula, and grilled Sadie Rose bread.

Serantoni's mantra of simplicity was reflected in the garlicky short rib tenders punctuated by lovely long ribbons of perfectly al dente house-made *pappardelle*. We also loved the pan-fried *branzino*, a coup of crisp skin and moist filet, all cradled in a simple fish stock reduction dotted with caper berries. Other highlights included the pillowy soft gnocchi and hearty flatiron steak with polenta. The serving station in the center of the dining room was an unnecessary distraction, but the upbeat staff showed an earnest love for the menu, delivering impressive descriptions of the dishes and what they taste like.