

TAVERNETTA

A Beloved Denver Institution

| BY TRACY ELLEN BEARD



BOBBY STUCKEY. PHOTO COURTESY OF CASEY WILSON



CODY CHEETHAM. PHOTO COURTESY OF CASEY WILSON

Tavernetta, a beloved Denver institution, is more than a restaurant—it's a reflection of its creators' shared love for Italian hospitality. The visionaries behind it all, Bobby Stuckey, Lachlan Mackinnon-Patterson, Peter Høglund, and Mark Falcone, have seamlessly combined their expertise to bring a taste of Italy to Union Station. Their stories, intertwined with commitment and ingenuity, reveal a collective mission: to make every guest, including my son, Garrett, and myself, feel at home while savoring the artistry of exceptional food and wine.

A Union of Passion

Stepping into Tavernetta is like catching a train straight to Italy—its aromas, warmth, and energy all mirror the traditions of Italian hospitality. But what truly fuels this celebrated restaurant is the remarkable synergy of its owners, a quartet of dreamers and doers who share a love for culinary excellence and heartfelt service.

It begins with Bobby Stuckey, a man whose journey epitomizes dedication to craft. Raised in Arizona, Bobby's restaurant career started humbly as a busser but blossomed into a legacy as one of the most decorated Master Sommeliers in America. His time at The Little Nell in Aspen set the stage for excellence, but it was his tenure at Thomas Keller's French Laundry



that defined his ethos. There, he honed his belief that service wasn't just about excellence but about making every guest feel at home. It was also there that Bobby crossed paths with his future partner, Lachlan Mackinnon-Patterson—a meeting that would spark a culinary revolution.

Lachlan, a culinary artist in every sense, brings precision and passion to the table. A Top Chef Masters competitor and James Beard Award winner, his journey from The French Laundry to founding Frasca Food and Wine in Boulder reveals his enduring commitment to showcasing the beauty of Italian cuisine. Inspired by the frascas (pizzeria/winebars) of Italy's Friuli-Venezia Giulia region, Lachlan and Bobby sought to create more than a restaurant—they built a sanctuary of community, flavors, and memories.

Peter Hoglund and Mark Falcone add even more to this powerhouse of talent. Peter's background in hospitality operations ensures that every detail at Tavernetta sings in harmony. At the same time, Mark, a visionary with Continuum Partners, grounds the project in Denver's vibrant Union Station neighborhood, where the restaurant's elegant simplicity feels like a natural extension of the city's heartbeat.

Together, this team brought Tavernetta to life in 2017, blending their shared histories and diverse expertise into an establishment that resonates with authenticity. At its core is a commitment to gracious hospitality.

From Bobby's wine-making ventures with Scarpetta to Lachlan's award-winning cuisine, the owners of Tavernetta are unified by a singular goal: to transport guests, if only for an evening, to a place where time slows, flavors captivate, and every moment feels like an escape to Italy.

Dinner

My son, Garrett, joined me for dinner. Our evening began with a couple of cocktails that set the tone for the meal. I opted for Late for the Train, a delicious, nicely balanced beverage made with Jones House Vodka, grapefruit, lemon, honey, and coconut and garnished with a lovely rose petal. Garrett chose the Batida Amarga, a tropical blend of Ypioca cachaca, cardamaro, passion fruit, condensed milk, and lime. Both drinks were tasty and appetizing, the perfect start to our culinary adventure.

Dinner officially began with a glass of MV Extra Brut, *Enfant de la Montagne*, Premier Cru, from Chamery, Montagne de Reims. This lovely Champagne sparkled in our glasses as we enjoyed rosemary focaccia and Burrata topped with trapanese pesto, pangrattato, and basil. The focaccia's toasted crumble added fabulous texture, and the Burra-

ta served with sundried tomatoes and Marcona almonds, was some of the best I have ever had—creamy, rich, and bursting with flavor.

We shared the Fritto Misto next, a delightful medley of prawns, calamari, market fish, and a creamy lemon aioli. The seafood was perfectly crisp and tender, and the aioli provided a tangy, luscious accompaniment. The Pancetta Cotta, a dish of pork belly with Nduja, black garlic, and mache that was wonderfully meaty and indulgent. The pork belly paired perfectly with a glass of J. Hofstatter Pinot Noir Meczan 2022, *Vigneti delle Dolomiti*, Alto Adige. The wine's fruit-forward notes balanced the richness of the dish beautifully.

One of the highlights of the evening was the Crudo made with hamachi, aqua pazza, fennel, olive, and Calabrian chili. The fish was incredibly fresh and clean, with gentle spice and a pleasant saltiness from the olives. It was a dish that epitomized simplicity and elegance.

For the Primi course, we enjoyed two standout pasta dishes. The Capunti featured braised rabbit, English peas, and smoked ricotta salata, creating a hearty and deeply satisfying dish. The Tagliatelle with Maine lobster, Calabrian chili, preserved tomato, and celery was equally rich and flavorful, the sweet lobster perfectly balanced by the chili's mild heat.

The Secondi course was a masterclass in Italian cuisine. The Agnello, a dish of lamb loin with nettle sformato, olive, and pistachio, was exceptionally tender and bursting with earthy flavors. Meanwhile, the Manzo, a New York strip with pesto calabrese and ramps, was succulent and perfectly cooked, the pesto adding a vibrant, herbaceous note to the dish.

By the time dessert arrived, we were pleasantly full but couldn't resist sampling both offerings. The Panna Cotta served with white chocolate, strawberry, and rhubarb sherbet, was light and refreshing—a delightful palate cleanser. The Rotolo Tropicale, a vanilla cake with ricotta, passion fruit, pineapple, and sweet cream gelato, was equally enticing, its tropical flavors perfectly balanced and not overly sweet.

The meal, service, and atmosphere at Tavernetta were nothing short of extraordinary. Enjoying a fabulous dinner with my son and watching him embrace each dish with curiosity and enthusiasm was a reminder of how food has the power to connect us—not just to a place, but to each other. ❖

