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CHAIN REACTION From left: The open kitchen at Scarpetta; spaghetti.

Scarpetta

RATING ★★★

Montage Beverly Hills
225 North Cañon Dr.,
310.860.7970, scotconant.com

What the stars mean:

0 = poor, unacceptable

★ = fair, some noteworthy qualities

★★ = good, above average

★★★ = very good, well above norm

★★★★ = excellent, among the area's best

★★★★★ = world-class, extraordinary in every detail.

Reviews are based on multiple visits.

Ratings reflect the reviewer's overall reaction to food, ambience and service.

Spaghetti West

Beverly Hills didn't need yet another Italian restaurant, but Scott Conant's Scarpetta at The Montage is a welcome exception | By Brad A. Johnson | Photography by Peden + Munk |

Everyone's talking about the spaghetti—which seems like a strange dish to obsess about. Obviously, this isn't your typical bowl of pasta. It's magical spaghetti. OK, well, no, not exactly. So how do I explain why it's causing such a stir? First, it's beautiful—a vertical swirl of noodles, a towering beehive of carbs whose every strand is slobbered with a thin sheen of bright red, almost orange tomato sauce (the only red-sauce item on the menu) whose tomatoes taste like they might have been grown at Chino Farms (in the VIP section), or maybe in the backyard of someone's grandma in Puglia, picked just a few hours ago, still warm and bursting with sunshine. The pasta is perfectly cooked, the very definition of “al dente.” Every bite suggests a mouthful of basil, even though it contains only a fleck. And then there's the idea of eating the perfect spaghetti not in a dumpy trattoria with checkered tablecloths but in one of the city's most elegant, grown-up dining rooms.

On my second visit to Scarpetta inside Montage Beverly Hills, I'm dining with The Redhead, and when I tell her the spaghetti is off-limits this night because I've already tried it and we need to sample other things, the

tantrum that ensues is not entirely unexpected. “No! Stop!” she says, “I can't hear you. *Lalalalalala*. I hate you.”

But allow me to back up. When I first heard that New York's Scott Conant was bringing his acclaimed Italian restaurant to Beverly Hills, I got excited. Then then I learned—much to my dismay—that this would be Conant's fourth or fifth branch of Scarpetta, and my heart grew heavy. Fourth? Fifth?! The fifth of anything—five officially makes a chain—hardly ever compares with the first, or even the third. Does anyone remember the fifth Spago? Can anyone name the fourth location of Mastro's?

As it turns out, the beautiful new Beverly Hills outpost opened fourth (following New York, Miami and Toronto). The fifth just opened in Las Vegas at The Cosmopolitan hotel.

Thus it is with my expectations understandably dampened that I dine at the fourth Scarpetta out of duty rather than genuine curiosity and excitement. When I arrive, the maître d' tries to seat me at a table on the patio, which seems strange since I reserved my table several days

HOURS Lunch: Daily,
11:30AM–2:30PM. Dinner:
Sun.–Thurs., 5:30PM–11PM;
Fri.–Sat., 5:30PM–midnight

WHO'S THERE *Betsy Bloomingdale's posse, stars galore, bicoastal players with vanity plates and a dude who's overheard on his cell phone saying, “You've gotta come down here. I'm with my wife and a couple of politicians!”*

ABOUT THE BAR *Scarpetta has its own private, very elegant bar that's completely separate from Montage's lobby bar.*

ABOUT THE NOISE *Surprisingly conversation-friendly.*

WHAT IT COSTS Lunch: Fixed price, two plates for \$28 per person; additional plates, \$12. Dinner: Appetizers, \$14–\$17; pastas, \$23–\$26 (add \$90 for white truffles); entrées, \$26–\$36; desserts, \$11. Corkage, \$35. Valet parking, \$5. Public parking, two hours complimentary at lunchtime; \$8 at night.

in advance. It's a cold, damp night, and the only other people outside are six voluptuous women with strong vocal chords, dark tans and heavy eye shadow who remind me of the Kardashians. Other than them, the patio is empty and lonely—and did I mention cold and damp?

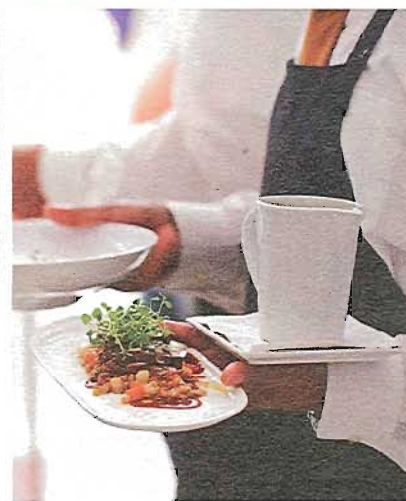
I politely decline and ask for a table inside where it's warm and cozy, and the electricity is literally pulsing. A few minutes into a glass of wine at the bar, I'm led to the dining room. I look up and notice Ashton Kutcher and Demi Moore at the next table. They glance up and smile, like old friends.

Our server arrives—I instantly recognize her from Spago, where she also works, and she gives me one of those looks like, "Don't I know you from somewhere?" "Spago," I say, and she laughs (not knowing my name). She's one of the best waitresses in town, always direct and honest, never afraid to call it like she sees it. Right away she urges us to try the spaghetti. So we order it as a starter, along with an appetizer of polenta and wild mushrooms. "Ooh," she says. "You know what? It's amazing, but I wouldn't order it as an appetizer, even though that's how it's listed on the menu. It's too rich. You should get the polenta as a side with your entrées." We do as she suggests.

By the time the bread arrives (and, admittedly, after my Aglianico has kicked in), I feel my spirits beginning to lift. Maybe I shouldn't begrudge this place just because it's a chain. I'm starting to like it. The focaccia is warm, just plucked from the oven. In a matter of minutes, I've eaten five pieces of it, in what I honestly believe to be a restrained fashion.

Then the spaghetti arrives, and that's when I'm at my happiest. I'm also won over by an appetizer of beef short ribs—not very much meat, but just enough to be rewarding as a starter—nestled atop a newfangled risotto made with farro, which rolls around in my mouth like tapioca.

I can't remember when or if I've ever seen a salad as beautiful as Conant's composition of grilled figs and wild greens. Wispy dandelions and whole specimens of several other weeds look like they've just been uprooted (literally, their root stems are still intact). Every leaf is perfectly positioned, like Justin Bieber's hair. Hiding beneath this feathery coif is perhaps the most exquisite burrata (technically *stracciatella*) in L.A., decorated with a smattering of fried capers and baby croutons along with



ITALIAN IMPORT
Clockwise from top left: Casonsei stuffed with beets and smoked ricotta; the dining room; always professional service; a chef's knife in the kitchen.

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purposeful splatters of balsamic. I wish the figs were sweeter and juicier. They're past their prime, but not enough to bother me. I've never been so excited about eating a salad. I nibble on leaf, then a piece of root, then dig my fork into the puddle of cheese and sweep it through the balsamic.

Of all the appetizers I've sampled, I'm least enthralled with the truffled beef crudo. It's a decent tartare, but to say it's "truffled" is a stretch. It's so bland that the only way to taste the beef is to eat it on its own. The grilled toast served alongside completely overpowers the beef's delicate flavor.

In addition to the spaghetti, other delicious pastas include ravioli filled with liquid-y foie gras and beautiful *casonsei* (similar to ravioli, but flatter and elongated) filled with beets and smoked ricotta.

The kitchen is especially adroit with fish. The selection changes, but if you see escolar, order it. This is a wonderful fish, so fatty and buttery and macho—it's the aquatic equivalent of pork belly. Or if you notice orata, this is another great choice. Orata is a Mediterranean sea bream, and it comes with a crispy skin that's curled up around the edges. Hot. Flaky. Mouthwatering. Mine is accompanied by big, pearly couscous and chunks of butter-drenched lobster.

The entrées are as interesting and unique as the appetizers and pastas. There's a pancetta-wrapped veal tenderloin that I love, but for my money, the best meat dishes are the ash-rolled venison loin and the aged beef sirloin. The venison is mild, thus probably from Australia or New Zealand. But never

mind the carbon footprint; it's an astoundingly delicious, tender piece of meat. The orb-shaped beef sirloin is the size of a regulation softball, split down the middle. I wish the crust were better caramelized. And it desperately wants to be salted. But it's an immensely satisfying hunk of meat.

Eating Scott Conant's food, I get the feeling he's a chef whose skill is felt rather than learned. There's an instinct, an emotion present in his cooking that's rare and wonderful. We've seen a lot of out-of-town celebrity chefs blow into L.A. to make a go of it here in recent years. Conant might be the best one yet. Oddly, and sadly, that heartfelt instinct and emotion that he pours into his spaghetti, fig salad, escolar and venison don't show up in the desserts, which are either boring or overly contrived and esoteric. I can't fully recommend any of them, but if I must, the best option might be the amaretto flan, which should be called chocolate flan, since it tastes more of chocolate than amaretto. The flan is great on its own, but it's served with a truly awful zabaglione-flavored ice cream. Why?

An ice cream like that is not felt, it's learned. Question is, can it be unlearned? I hope so, because aside from the desserts I really enjoy this place and look forward to returning. The service is among the best in town, consistently. Who cares if it's the fifth or the fourth or even the 100th? Oh, and look, Ashton Kutcher is getting up from his seat to greet someone. Yowza, it's Sean Penn with a beautiful young brunette. They join Ashton and Demi's table mid-meal. And... wait for it... yep, they're eating spaghetti. ▣