

ICON

The intersection of art, entertainment, culture, opinion and mad genius.

Dining

ROBERT GORDON

VALANNI

AFTER PATROLLING THE DELAWARE Valley restaurant beat all these years, I confess a fierce loyalty. Philly foodies are blessed with our scene. Nonetheless, although Quaker City's restaurant quality and quality/price index measure up to the nation's more celebrated foodie Meccas like New York, LA, and DC, I concede that our scene has a few weak spots, like our ethnic-food scene. If a New Yorker at midnight hankers for a wildebeest's ear on a hoagie roll, he can find a place that serves it—unless the place is out of hoagie rolls (one thing that would never happen in our fair city). But to continue that illustration, Philly is light on fine, late-night dining venues. That little gig abets the hard-to-shake rap that Philly's sidewalks roll up at nine. It suggests lack of big-time city sophistication.

As for sophistication, no one would ever question Valanni's sophistication. The sleek interior is smartly partitioned to create a variety of moods. The cozy-yet-cosmo front dining room where icy white undulations ramble the length and width of one of the walls gives way to the hip, kinetic energy of an attractive contemporary bar and barroom. A long, sleek dining room with a more laid-back feel chills backstage behind the barroom.

But aside from those trappings of sophistication, Valanni serves an extensive late-night menu till 1 AM. Score one for an underserved demographic in the City of Brotherly Love, the night-owls.

I shouldn't headline with Valanni's late-night fine dining. But please indulge me. I'm delighted whenever I find a late-night dining venue and to find one that operates at Valanni's level of excellence makes me ecstatic.

Make no mistake, the cornerstone of Valanni is quality. Valanni's serves a superb slate of small-plates and, as noted, does so in swank, yet relaxing confines. Credit that vibe to a cheery, attractive wait staff. To a person, they're well grounded in their métier. Their attitude is grounded, too. They're all accommodating and down to earth.

The menu not only tantalizes, it delivers. Listed ingredients appear on the plate (What a concept! Menu misrepresentation and hyperbole is proliferating at an alarming rate). That doesn't prove excellence. But it's a start. The proof of Valanni's excellence is, as always, in the pudding. Or the tapas, in Valanni's case, Executive Chef John Strain and Chef R. Evan Turney have put together a sublime selection of dishes that tap the best traditions the Mediterranean region and supplement them with some New World Latin heat.

One of Valanni's menu categories is Vegetarian Tapas, under which a dozen different choices appear. Even the most resolute meat-eater would be tempted to convert from their carnivorous cravings after crunching clever dishes like Crispy Brussels Sprouts. The tips of the sprouts are crackly, almost caramelized. Liberal shavings of Marcona almonds and copious chunks of Granny Smith apples harmonize without a false note in the mix. In Tostones, fruity plantain undertones play through crispy twice-fried crunchy cladding with cilantro-lime vinaigrette overlaying perky pucker. Vegan Flatbread piles an ambrosial vegan medley of white beans, caramelized shallots, olives, fennel, and sun-dried tomatoes atop crusty, hearty flatbread.

The kitchen team does a yeoman's job giving perk to Spanakopita, packing this Greek phyllo specialty with spinach, feta, and caramelized onions.



Valanni's spectacular Lobster & Crab Mac & Cheese.

The phyllo itself is light and airy.

Besides the Vegetarian Tapas, there is a dozen Medi-Latin Tapas, which comprise an eclectic menu that spans the Mediterranean region and adds some nice twists to standards. Figs in a Blanket, a personal favorite (and caloric concession) teams perfectly crisped Applewood bacon for soul with plump figs clad in bleu cheese.

Crispy Pork Belly plates slabs of pork, crisped outside but heavenly tender inside. Interspersed with red beets, the duo is garnished with micro greens and bathed in a colorful orange pommery crème fraîche. Grilled Beef Kabobs borrow a riff from south of our border, chocolate-peanut mole, which nicely folds a tasty, subtle undertone in with the perk of balsamic vinegar glaze.

(A Medi-Latin Plate—12 different tapas—can be had for \$95. Ditto for the Vegetarian Tapas Plate for \$85. They're great grazing expeditions for foodies.)

Valanni rings with a European feel and European appeal. Guests can order cured meat or a tasting of cured meats. Ditto for imported cheeses or a tasting of cheeses. And yes, amidst this cornucopia of small plates, there's a good roster of larger plates like Lamb Shoulder, Grilled Spanish Octopus, Dakota Steak. None top \$15. Finally I have to mention the three Paellas that bring a small sea's worth of crustaceans and fish to the table. It's impossible to finish and equally delicious the following day.

Valanni has become a favorite eatery for ICON, whether pre- or post-theater and any time in between. Sure, one reason (of many) why I love this place is its late-hour dining. Okay, so I'm a night owl—but Valanni deserves all the hoots it gets. ■