


Special section Inside Seattle

Chef's table

7 courses, 10 guests, and 1 dedicated chef add up to a dinner to remember

BY MOLLY WATSON PHOTOGRAPHS BY JIM HENKENS



Justin Neidermeyer (seated top right, at the head of the table) welcomes his guests to a special outdoor dinner at Pian Pianino.

A BASKET of still-drying *tajarin*—long golden pasta strands twirled together in tangled nests—tempts me to grab a fistful and let it run through my fingers. While I'm exercising extreme self-control to keep my grubby hands out of the pasta, Justin Neidermeyer, owner-chef of the new Pian Pianino, places a platter of hand-cut *jamón serrano* (Spain's answer to prosciutto) in front of me as we wait for the rest of his dinner guests to arrive. "Here," he says, "you must be hungry." >

Our animated conversation comes to an abrupt halt while we savor the delicate, toothsome pasta and the deep, woody flavor of mushrooms cooked in butter

I'm too distracted by the pasta to *feel* hungry, but I eat the *jamón* anyway, savoring its rough-hewn texture and gently salty flavor.

"A hundred years ago, how do you think people cut their prosciutto?" asks Neidermeyer somewhat rhetorically as he carefully slices portions from the air-cured pork leg. "They cut it like this, by hand, with a sharp knife."

Neidermeyer cuts a lot of things by hand. When he's not slicing ham, he's hand-cutting the pasta he sells at the Ballard Farmers Market. His dedicated following happily shells out \$5 to \$10 for two servings of the lovingly made noodles.

"Everything Justin does, he does with great care," says his former boss Holly Smith, chef-owner of Cafe Juanita. "One day I found him painting the cafe's pasta room sunny yellow. It was too dreary in there, he said, and it needed cheering up."

His need for an inviting space is evident in his intimate new restaurant, where several nights a week he gathers as many as 25 people around two tables and serves them a seven-course meal, family-style. The dinners actually began a year ago in the attic of Via Tribunali pizzeria as word-of-mouth events: Lucky people in the know would sign up to share a meal with perfect strangers in a dinner-party setting. Neidermeyer and his small staff keep that homey feeling alive in his new space.

"By having a set menu and serving family-style, I remove variables like inept or obsequious service that can become barriers between the people eating and the person cooking," explains Neidermeyer. "You wouldn't think about asking for something else at a friend's house—you just sit back and enjoy the food and the company."

He's always been partial to this

Pasta pairing 101

Serving the right pasta for a sauce makes all the difference in the success of the dish, says Neidermeyer. There are all sorts of theories about which pasta shapes go with which sauces, but at the most basic level, all you need to know is the difference between dried pasta and egg pasta.

DRIED PASTA is factory-made and dried completely before packaging. It's made without any fat, remains quite firm when cooked, and pairs best with olive oil-based sauces (including most tomato sauces), which cling well to its surface.

EGG PASTA is sometimes used fresh, but can also be dried (but then is still not the same as "dried pasta"). It's softer than dried pasta when cooked because of the fat and protein from the egg and is better paired with sauces that contain some animal fat, such as meat *ragu* and cream- or butter-based sauces, which it absorbs easily.



FROM TOP Neidermeyer takes a break from cooking to join the table at one of his dinner parties; herbs and blossoms fresh from the garden and ready for the kitchen; serving hand-cut *tajarin* with sage and butter; handmade *gnocchi* with pancetta, tomato, and saffron gets passed around the table.



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relaxed style of dining, and time spent in Italy only reinforced his belief. “I love the attitude about food in Italy—the importance placed on its role in daily life and the appreciation for things done simply,” he says. “I’d move there in a heartbeat, except for the amazing community of chefs and other food people in Seattle.”

As I watch Neidermeyer cook, the other dinner guests arrive, introduce themselves, and attack their own platter of *jamón* and olives. As we gather around the table, the effect is more dinner party than restaurant, and the good will is palpable.

First we crunch on a radicchio and endive salad with balsamic dressing. Next to arrive is *carne cruda*, beautiful, flavorful beef from Skagitj River Ranch, which Neidermeyer has chopped to a texture like coarse ground beef. It’s a revelation to many at the table: Who knew plain raw beef seasoned only with salt and olive oil could be so savory, so satisfying? We empty the platter in short order.

When I finally get to experience the pasta, it’s been tossed with a rich sauce of porcini mushrooms and raw-milk butter that makes my heart skip a beat. I can tell my tablemates agree—our gregarious, animated conversation comes to an abrupt halt while we savor the delicate, toothsome pasta and the deep, woody flavor of mushrooms cooked in butter.

We proceed to a roasted pork loin served with braised beet greens and green garlic, a trio of very fine local and Italian cheeses, and baked apples with honey and hazelnuts for dessert—all excellent. But what I remember, and continue to crave, long after the meal is over are the *jamón*, *carne cruda*, and pasta. They were cut by hand. And it is wonderful to know that it makes a difference.

INFO Pian Pianino Antico Pastificio Artigianale (\$\$\$\$; reservations required; Thu–Sat; 2203 Eastlake Ave. E.; 206/251-7673); Ballard Farmers Market (Sun 11–3 Nov–Mar, 10–4 Apr–Oct; 22nd and Ballard Avenues) ■