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Trattoria Spaghetti worth the search

BY BILL REINHARDT COURIER-POST STAFF • OCTOBER 31, 2008

It's true Trattoria Spaghetti is in the shadow of Voorhees' Main Street complex, but that isn't the entire reason it's difficult to find. Giovanni Amaru's restaurant is in a strip shopping center where a couple of stores already have said ciao, the eatery's front is small and its green sign doesn't particularly shout out to passersby on Centennial Boulevard.

What's an owner-chef from Sicily to do?

What else? He heads to the cucina and cooks up a storm, then lets his customers spread the word to their friends and their friends spread the word to well, you know how it works.

Things start slowly the Wednesday night we visit; it isn't until later that a few tables fill in the cozy 60-seat BYOB establishment.

Soups at Trattoria Spaghetti try to fill you up. Amaru's lentil soup hides ingredients that make the thick creation luscious enough to make a meal of, especially with rave worthy Italian bread. That speaks double for a pasta e fagioli that's more a thick hearty stew of pasta and chewy cannellini beans than a soup. Each is \$5.95. Or, start with a standard tortellini in brodo (\$7.95).

Appetizers straight from the old country - including antipasto, involtini melanzane and calamari fritti - await.

Customers may confuse the inviting broccoli rabe and sausage appetizer (\$10.95) with an entree. The man-sized sausage nips at the tongue with nice spiciness while the sturdy rabe stubbornly maintains a little too much of its robustness even through a heavy presence of garlic. You'd be wise to start off with plump mussels in a tame but tantalizing sprightly light red dipping sauce (\$11.95) that helps empty the bread dish.

Amaru has proven he's as good at decorating as he is at cooking at Trattoria Spaghetti. The restaurant comes out pleasantly relaxed all done up in maroon. Large mirrors with wide dark frames on snow-white walls add stylistic drama to the smart scene. Windows sparkle and tables covered with white and maroon almost prep the place for royalty.

The busy Amaru cares about his customers, be they loyal returnees or first-time diners who have tracked down his eatery. The owner-chef may welcome patrons, take orders or set tables. Amaru marches to a nearby table with an uncooked fish on a platter to answer a question about a broiled fish entree.

"I'm the main chef, but I do everything," Amaru says.

From a menu that covers a lot of ground, customers can play it safe with any of a half-dozen choices of pasta and no less than 15 different sauces (all \$16.95). Amaru's choice? He highly recommends the Bolognese crafted of ground beef, onions, carrots and celery. "We cook it for hours," he proudly points out.

The same \$16.95 price is attached to the familiar baked items - gnocchi, ravioli, lasagna, baked ziti, stuffed ziti and manicotti - found in every Italian eatery worth its extra virgin olive oil.

Other fan favorites might include chicken (\$18.95), veal (\$25.95) or seafood (\$18 to \$35) selections, most prepared, Amaru admits, using "recipes that are years old" gleaned with love from his madre and nonna. Nightly specials might be simple or more elaborate: the night we stop seafood risotto (\$29.95) or vegetable risotto (\$22.95) are mighty tempting.

Instead, I can't get past saltimbocca alla Romana (\$25.95) on the everyday menu. A sweet velvety mushroom-marsala wine sauce weaves perfectly with salt-inspired prosciutto, mozzarella cheese and spinach on tender veal medallions. A simple side of pasta, in this case capellini in a surprising light yet substantial tomato sauce, surprises.

"Those heavy sauces, they clog your veins," says Amaru.

My mate insists the buttery garlic sauce on her shrimp and scallops broccoli rabe special (\$25.95) needs "a little more zing." However, the dish doesn't fall short on substance with a trio of firm shrimp and a like number of tender scallops over al dente spaghetti.

Chances are you'll pass on the confections, but if you've wisely thought ahead and saved room, a flute of limoncello, a nifty extra-creamy mix of lemon gelato and limoncello, and a classic cannoli with a maddeningly sweet whipped filling, make nice endings.

We leave after signing on the dotted line for \$112 (not including sizable tip for capable service) with a promise to ourselves to do this all over again in the near future.

Bill Reinhardt is a veteran restaurant critic. He has worked for the Courier-Post for 39 years and is currently an editor in the Features Department. Reach him at (856) 486-2439 or breinhardt@courierpostonline.com



Giovanni Amaru, Owner Of Trattoria Spaghetti, prepares a dish at his Voorhees Restaurant. Thursday, October 23, 2008. (John Ziomek/Courier-Post)

Below Review copied from Courier-Post LifeStyles>> Dining published on Sunday, November 2, 2008

REVIEW

Trattoria Spaghetti
8011 Centennial Blvd.
Voorhees
(856) 489-1212
www.trattoriaspaggettovoorhees.com

■ **Cuisine:** Italian

■ **Overall:** ★★★★★ (very good)

■ **Food:** ★★★★★

■ **Ambience:** ★★★★★

■ **Value:** ★★★★★

■ **Service:** ★★★★★

■ **Prices:** Appetizers, \$5.95 to \$13.95; soups, \$5.95 to \$7.95; entrees, \$16.95 to \$34.95; desserts, \$6

■ **Accommodations:** All major cards accepted. Wheelchair accessible. Recommended on weekend for parties of five or more.

■ **Entertainment:** No

■ **Alcohol:** BYOB

■ **Brunch:** No

■ **Late night:** No

■ **Outdoor dining:** No

■ **Cost cutters:** Daily specials

■ **Parking:** Adjacent lot

■ **Hours:** Tuesdays through Fridays, 11:30 a.m. to closing; Saturdays and Sundays, 4 p.m. to closing; closed Mondays

■ **Recommended dishes:** Lentil soup, pasta e fagioli, broccoli rabe and sausage, mussels in red sauce, shrimp and scallops broccoli rabe, saltimbocca, limoncello, cannoli

■ **What the stars mean:** Five stars is excellent, four stars is very good, three stars is good, two stars is fair, one star is poor