

Florence's serves big helpings of tasteful Italian experience

By: The Undercover Epicure

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When I think of Italian cuisine many things come to mind: Pasta of different shapes and colors, sausages, meatballs, eggplant, olives, marinara, calamari, Parmesan cheese. The list goes on. Certain combinations, such as mushrooms, peppers, and onions, affect me sometimes more like an aphrodisiac or incense than tasteful food.

How Italian cuisine tastes is important, but one thing I consider vital to a restaurant serving this cuisine is how it is served. This doesn't exactly mean how the food looks, which is important as well, but the style of the service. It should be an example of comfort, and most of this comfort will be evident in the physical décor and most important, the waitstaff.

My partner and I were searching late for a place to eat, and as we rolled up Route 3 in Merrimack toward home, we saw Florence's Restaurant. As a former chef I have inherent reservations about arriving to eat at a restaurant one hour before close. You often will not get the same quality of service or food you would normally get. This was obviously not the case at Florence's.

The Décor is nice with vines running along the walls and up to faux window boxes. Pictures of Italy line the walls, and colors are deep and warm. One thing I appreciated was the sound absorption panel attached to the ceiling. This is important because when you feel at home in a restaurant you tend to get a little boisterous.

Our server was definitely on top of things, thankfully knowing the subtle and important difference between being attentive and being pushy. She took our drink orders and gave us plenty of bread to munch on while we examined the menu. We easily decided on Mussels Marinara (\$7.95) for our appetizer, choosing to get it Fra Diavolo, and were not disappointed.

The portion was large, almost a meal in itself. Other appetizers of interest to me were the stuffed clams (\$5.95), sautéed peppers and sausage (\$4.95), and of course Italian antipasto (\$4.75 single, \$8.25 double).

Deciding on an entrée was tough; the menu is extensive, making it easy for anyone to find a dish to their liking. I narrowed it down to three possible choices: gnocchi Bolognese (11.95), potato pasta with meat sauce and cheese; veal Verdicchio (\$15.95), with peppers, mushrooms, onions, artichoke hearts and butter wine sauce; and chicken a la Giuseppe (\$14.95), sautéed with sausage and mushrooms and baked with tomato sauce and mozzarella cheese.

Though I hadn't had gnocchi in quite awhile I couldn't resist the peppers, onions, and mushrooms of the Verdicchio. My partner decided on the Chicken Salti in Bocca

(\$16.95), stuffed with mozzarella cheese, served with mushrooms and lemon butter sauce.

While waiting for the entrees, our waitress delivered the salads that came with our meals. Instead of having two individual plates, we were given a bowl of greens from which to serve ourselves. This was nice, being another example of family style service, and we were each given a bottle of our chosen dressing.

As I watched our server arrive with our entrees, it was apparent that they contained exactly what I had expected: More food than we could possibly eat. My plate was so large I thought our server might need a spotter to help her put it on the table. The Verdicchio looked great, and I was glad to see the veal was sautéed nicely and not overcooked. Its butter wine sauce was just enough to coat the meal, as it should be, and was not overpowered by herbs.

My partner's Bocca was eye appealing as well and tasted fine, though the prosciutto seemed to be cut a little too thick and was a bit salty. The chicken on the other hand was perfect. I always have a fear of ordering chicken in a restaurant, knowing there is a fine line between done and overdone. My partner didn't seem to have a problem with it, so I attribute my minor dislikes of this dish to an overly expectant palate.

Seeing that it was getting late and we were soon to be the only patrons left in the restaurant, we quickly had our remaining food wrapped up and ordered our dessert to go. I had little choice in the sweets decision, my cohort being particularly fond of tiramisu.

Again I was impressed by our waitperson, who had it ready to go in no time, taping two plastic forks to our to-go container, just in case we couldn't wait until we got home to eat it.

I waddled out of Florence's just the way I had envisioned it, with more than enough food in my stomach and enough leftovers for another meal.

3 1/2 stars overall

Food: 3 stars

Service: 4 stars

Atmosphere: 3 stars

Summary:

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Truly living up to its self-proclaimed "casual Italian dining," Florence's Restaurant offers all your Italian favorites with a few extras you might not expect. Its extensive menu will keep you coming back again and again, never coming close to the same meal twice. Be

forewarned though: Its excellent wait staff and chefs will make your mother feel as if her kitchen expertise is no longer needed.

3 and one half stars