

Florence's Restaurant in Merrimack authentic North End Italian cuisine

Mystery Diner

Nashua Telegraph

May 7, 1999

The old expression "you can't judge a book by its cover" can easily be applied to restaurants too. Fancy buildings, large signs, and colorful ads don't really tell you anything about the quality of the food. Indeed the best publicity for a restaurant is word of mouth- satisfied customers telling friends and acquaintances about the great meal they had.

Even though Florence's Restaurant has been in Merrimack since 1989, I had not heard of it. (Please keep in mind that I don't live in Merrimack). Its new location on Daniel Webster Highway next to the new Hammer Hardware is inauspicious from the outside and might be overlooked by the unenlightened diner. Here is where I want to begin the verbal grapevine to encourage anyone looking for authentic, homemade Italian cuisine to come through the doors, and experience casually elegant dining. The spacious dining rooms inside are designed with the feel of an outdoor terrace, divided by pillars and surrounded by grape arbors. One could imagine being in Tuscany, or perhaps Venice, as the large painted fresco might suggest. While waiting for my husband to join me, I let myself believe I was in Italy and ordered some wine. Florence's has an extensive wine list including several classic Chianti's. I started with a glass of Merlot and my husband, once he arrived had the house red, which was Italian Burgundy from Tuscany.

The first thing I noticed on the menu was the statement that all the soups are homemade. This is an important indicator to me of the quality and care put into a menu. Of the six choices, I chose the minestrone, which was chock full of vegetables in a flavorful tomato broth. There are five cold appetizers to choose from and over 15 hot appetizers, from which my husband and I had the sweet Italian Sausages. These are wonderfully flavorful sausages in natural casings, covered in a thick and savory marinara sauce.

All of the main courses are served with a salad, which comes to the table family style accompanied by the homemade house Italian dressing. With it is warm bread, which was replenished by a very thoughtful and charming bus-girl. Selecting among the choice of pastas was not easy. We could have had linguine, ziti, spaghetti or fettuccine served with any of 14 different sauces such as meat sauce, clam sauce, mushroom garlic and oil, and shrimp sauce. Several other specials tempted us, such as braciola, sausage cacciatore, and mussels marinara. Ultimately I chose veal Braccioletti, which was rolled with prosciutto and mozzarella, then sautéed with fresh mushrooms and ham in a marsala wine sauce. As a garlic lover I was in heaven. The rich marsala sauce enhanced the flavor of the thickly cut fresh mushrooms, and blended with the flavors of the meat. The portion was large, and it was evident it had come right from the pan. My husband had the chicken parmesan which included two very large chicken breasts, breaded and topped with cheese and marinara sauce. This is one of his favorite dishes, and he was quite

pleased with the tender and flavorful cutlets and sauce. Both entrees came with sides of linguini- the best I have ever had.

Although we were quite full, we chose to split a cannoli, which was one of the several homemade desserts on the menu. The cannoli shell was perfectly crisp, yet light and the filling had a chocolate and cinnamon blend to the cheese. With that as a sample I know I will be back to try some of the desserts such as the chocolate mousse, pineapple cake, and Tiramisu.

Florence's Restaurant in Merrimack is the sister restaurant to Florence's in Boston's North End. Actually it is the "daughter" restaurant as the proprietor of each is named Florence and they are mother and daughter. Mom should be proud- Florence's makes Merrimack's North End an Italian haven.