

Florence's a wonderland of Italian cooking

By Our Gourmet,

Union Leader & Sunday News Feb 3, 2000

A drive down Route 3 in Merrimack offers local gourmands many a fine eatery and Florence's ranks right up there with the best of them. Of course it does. Twenty-five years of family restauranteuring in Boston's north End will create a generation of expertise.

Now all of that experience is concentrated in New Hampshire (Florence's on North Street in Boston has closed) and it is us, fellow gourmet diners, who benefit from the epicurean delights developed over the years by the Romano, Foti and Smokler families. Daughter Florence Smokler's restaurant in Merrimack is now in its 11th year, and a visit to this wonderland of Italian cooking will bring out the beast in you... the hungry beast, that is.

Feast on rich Italian pasta and sauces, flavorful sautéed veal and chicken, delicately prepared shrimp and seafood –and enjoy a glass of wine or two – and you'll come away with the memories that only the finest of meals are made of.

It's difficult to get a table sometimes at Florence's. An hour wait is not uncommon. There is a spacious cocktail lounge available for waiting, but if there is a drawback to the new Florence's (formerly located in an upstairs location down the road at 301 DW Highway), it is the waiting area.

It is a smoking lounge, and bland overhead lighting is connected to the ceiling fans that, this night could not keep up with the smoke. It was very crowded this Saturday night and everyone in the lounge seemed to be smoking. Plus, with the volume of patrons the bartenders seemed a bit overwhelmed, and the result was many uncleared tables, a wait for cocktails, and a smoky lounge.

In Florence's dining area, however, one enters a comfortable spacious, sparkling clean arena with a fun, family atmosphere that gets one directly into the mood to eat. Two large dining rooms are separated by tall black columns adorned with ivy, pine cones, silk flowers, and little lights. Artwork includes Italian-setting paintings and a large mural of Venice, and the hardwood floors are spanking clean, but a little loud.

This high-volume restaurant serves hundreds of diners in an evening, and the noise created by all of the guests resonates sharply off the walls and the hard wood floors. There are ceiling fans in the restaurant similar to the lounge, but the smoking area is clearly and effectively divided from the main dining room.

Florence's also has a function room that can seat more than two dozen. Tables are festooned with double cloth – a black and white-checked tablecloth diagonally layered with an additional bright-red cloth, a nice touch.

Florence's menu will astound you – it is large and super-varied and probably prompts a lot of appetizer sales while patrons try to make their best choice from the 75 – or-so entrée selections.

A great starter dish is the sautéed peppers and Sausage (\$4.50), featuring sliced green peppers and sliced sweet Italian sausage in garlic and olive oil. With a bit of bread, these tasty morsels make for a delicious and heart start to a good Italian meal. Also off the Hot Appetizers list (there are also six Cold Appetizers and five soups) we tried the Fried Mozzarella (\$4.50), which brought us three triangular (large) fried cheese wedges and a helping of warmed marinara sauce. Next time we would probably repeat the sausage and pepper dish substitute a soup or an antipasto for the mozzarella.

Salads are a treat at Florence's, served family style and with a choice of just two dressings – a creamy lemon poppy seed or house Italian. We prefer a limited choice rather than having to listen to a confusing litany of dressings. The poppy seed dressing was distinctively, unmistakably poppy-flavored – it had spirit! The salad featured the freshest of lettuce, in a large bowl with plenty of tomatoes, croutons, red cabbage, assorted greens, cucumbers, and lots of large, fresh sliced mushrooms. Accompanied by self-serve crushed black pepper and another slice of bread, our salads were a cooling and fresh interlude between our hearty appetizers and rich meals to come.

As previously mentioned Florence's offers so many dishes it is a difficult choice. Between pasta and seafood, steaks and chops, Italian specialties, chicken, veal, Florence's specials and pasta specialties, you can truly get lost in the forest of entrees. But know this— when you find your way out of the trees, it will be a walk – and a meal—that is well worth it. Veal Pizzaiola (\$14.95) was one of the many dishes prepared the same with chicken or veal, accompanied by linguine. Gourmet chose this one for the special kick of the ingredients. Tender sliced veal graces this dish, sautéed with an interesting variety of garlic, anchovies and oregano in a tomato sauce with fresh capers and mushrooms. Mmmmm...what a taste! Tart capers and anchovies, smooth garlic and a thick rich, meaty tomato sauce and a touch of oregano – served over a large helping of linguine – make the veal in the dish – tender and juicy in its own right – a super bonus.

My companion was similarly enchanted with the Chicken Verdicchio (\$14.95), which we both enjoyed and then brought plenty home for a delicious warm-up meal the next night. The portions are large and the Verdicchio seemed even larger than my Pizzaiola. Large sliced green peppers, tons of sliced mushrooms and white onions, with marinated artichoke hearts – all swimming in a rich butter and white wine sauce served over Linguine. This was a lighter dish than the veal, although still very rich and the juicy sautéed chicken was especially at home with the white wine sauce. Add the artichoke hearts and the mushrooms, and some of the other ingredients in this dish were made for each other.

Although Gourmet would find it difficult to stray from veal or seafood at such a haven for heavenly Italian food, next time I'm at Florence's I'm going to sample a meat and potatoes dish that I have never tried before. Pork Chops Vinegar Peppers & Potatoes

(\$14.95), sautéed in garlic, butter, and white wine (what else?) sounds scrumptious. But then again Tortellini Con Panna (meat filled pasta rings in cream sauce with mozzarella and prosciutto) and Fettuccine Alfredo, or Shrimp Scampi, or Calamari, or Grilled Swordfish also sound terrific.

Then there are... oh well, you get the idea. Too many dishes and not enough time. We're just hoping we don't waste much time before returning to Florence's in Merrimack

Ratings:

Food 3 1/2 stars

Value 3 1/2 stars