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REVIEW



Ciao Wine Bar

BY ALAN A. VERNON & SEAN KELLY KEENAN March 10, 2010 21:03

Address: 133 Yorkville

Phone: 416-925-2143

Dinner for two: \$120 including
taxes and tip

Reservations: No

Wheelchair access: Yes

Many have tried. All have failed. So what makes Liberty Entertainment Group President Nick Di Donato think he can take the location where the overly ambitious Flow, like others before, flopped and make Ciao Wine Bar?

Well, for starters, Ciao is just a nice, comfortable neighbourhood haunt. And the key ingredients suggested by that phrase seem to have already assured Di Donato a recipe for success. It is one of the most accessible area eateries in the well-heeled hood of Yorkville. With Mark McEwan's stratospherically priced One just across the road, recession-proof places like Ciao are an obvious first choice even for many of those whose Lamborghini Diablos are parked out front.

Leave it to the beautiful Nadia Di Donato (we want her recipe for eternal youth) to transform what was once a cold and uninviting, albeit elegant, three-level dining room into a grotto of good times, replete with pizza ovens, butcher-block tables and ambient custom-crafted lighting. Even her simple decision to reveal the once-hidden and homey Georgian windows is a sign that the welcome mat is truly out for everyone.

Like a typical new owner, Nick table-hops like an excitable puppy to ensure everyone is happy. And judging from the bustling business (with diners already numbering in the hundreds a night), they are. But the hospitality-business veteran has a lot of practice when it comes to delivering memorable moments. His other establishments include Rosewater, Spice Route and the Liberty Grand Entertainment Complex. And though some members of the wait staff could use a refresher course on menu items, there are enough servers on hand to tackle any request, pronto.

With more than 8,000 square feet and a seating capacity of about 250, this space may not necessarily conjure up visions of mamma's kitchen, but we are confident of the authentically rustic Neapolitan cuisine from chef Roberto Punzo. Home-style classics like stracciatella (\$7) share space with salumi boards (various prices) and Ciao's massive, foot-long calzones (\$15), stuffed with roasted veggies or sausage and soppressata. Even Mr. Steinbrenner would be impressed.

When was the last time you saw a whole stone-baked stuffed artichoke (\$11)? It is perhaps too heavy on the breadcrumbs and not heavy enough on the Parmesan, but it's awesome all the same. Ultra-tender slices of beautifully roasted eggplant (\$11) get topped with a soft, gooey blanket of bocconcini and a homemade tomato sauce brightened up with a garnish of whole leaves of fresh basil. And sharesies come easy with salads big enough for four average adults (or 40 supermodels). But what really impresses is the gargantuan amount of radicchio in the fantastic peppery arugula, endive and Portobello mushroom salad (\$12) drizzled with lemon and olive oil. More Reggiano shavings would've been nice, but savoury simplicity doesn't get any better.

The lasagna (\$18) is generous enough for two, with layers of soft, egg-rich pasta stuffed with a tasty if somewhat dry Bolognese sauce and topped with gorgeously ooey-gooey mozzarella. Pasta fagioli (\$9), a mix of fresh white and romano beans with ditalini pasta in an overly thick and sweet tomato sauce, is not as spicy as the menu suggests. But the evening special, a mixed grill (\$30), is super value: a couple of garlicky, medium-cooked lamb chops, plump chicken breast, an oddly hot-doggish spicy sausage and a hunk of medium-well sirloin sides with perhaps too-generous a pile of grilled peppers.

The night's true winner is the sauceless San Matteo thin-crust pizza (\$16). Mozzarella melts over a blisteringly crisp crust redolent with refreshing bites of rapini, garlic and spicy Italian sausage.

And desserts? For sure, save some room for sweets. A massive icy semifredo (\$6) in a pool of well-matched Frangelico-laced zabaglione is bad-carb perfection. And a trio of heavenly house-made gelato scoops (\$7), lemon, almond-laced Pistachio and chocolate hazelnut, should be offered as take-out. A lemon ricotta cheesecake (\$8), topped with raspberries and laid across a thin swirl of caramel, elevates light and airy to angelic new levels.

All too often, restaurateurs try too hard to cater to the revolving door of food trends. In the case of Ciao, the formula is fixed because Di Donato knows that classic tradition never goes out of style. This is what sets Ciao apart from its more high-flying neighbours, and grounds it firmly on earth, and could be the key to stopping the revolving door of restos in this location.

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