

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

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Pretty on the inside, with food to match

By Sharon Muhlenkort

I got the call from Nick and couldn't believe it. He was inviting me to review a restaurant with him -- tonight! My husband couldn't make it, so my friend Emma agreed to come with me. We got dressed up and drove over to San Ramon from Walnut Creek. Not an area we're familiar with. We drove by Incontro twice, knowing it should be "right here," but we missed it both times. It just didn't have the charming appearance that we had imagined in our exuberance.

Our hearts dropped when we realized that this was, in fact, the correct address. We both immediately thought that this was just a family pasta cafe, rather than an authentic Italian restaurant.

Mom was right, though. You cannot tell a book by its cover! Once inside, the newly remodeled restaurant was as elegant as any in downtown Walnut Creek. A good sign. We were greeted by an Italian-speaking host, who turned out to be one of the owners. He first sat us at a table by the window looking out on the street, so we asked to be moved to an interior table, and he happily obliged.

We chose a prosecco to rinse off the 100-degree heat of the day. It worked well with a wonderful crostini concoction layered with eggplant, olives, well-cooked onion and tomato -- boy, was it good! Unfortunately for me, my companions all felt the same way about the crostini, seeming to prefer it over their salad and smoked salmon. Next time I'll order my own.

The gnocchi was tasty and fun for a change, but simple. We hardly noticed, though, because by now we were engaged in conversation with the other owner, enjoying stories about his and his father's village in Italy, pictured on the wall. He chatted as he opened a bottle of Montepulciano, which was excellent. I've heard people use the word "velvet" for red wine before, but I had not tasted it myself, until now. We offered the owner a glass, and he politely declined the first time, but had a toast with us before long. Part of the charm of the evening.

My companions and I discussed philosophy and psychology over a delicious main course. I ordered the sea bass with lemon and capers. Quite good. The sleeper of the night, though, was the flatiron steak. Steak is something I never order, but I will definitely order this cut on my next visit. It actually melted in my mouth.

The desserts were pleasant, but not outstanding. The tiramisu was tasteless and needed a punch. However, I loved the Italian cherries.

Overall, the food was actually quite good. The ambience was intimate: great for conversation. It was easy to engage the owner and feel like we were visiting friends in Italy. As he spoke with us, he greeted others by name. A nice touch. The location, however, is a problem. I don't want to go out to dinner and look at the traffic speed by on a busy avenue and stare at fast food restaurants through a large uncovered window.

My advice is to go after dark, unless the owners put up a nice window covering that lets light in and keeps out the only real complaint I have: the location. This restaurant would do great on one of the side streets that hover around downtown Walnut Creek. But until then, if you can get past the cover, you are in for a great treat!

Sharon Muhlenkort lives with her husband and two children in Walnut Creek.