

Incontro Ristorante

Mangia, San Ramon, because real Italian has finally arrived
By April Dembosky

Sitting at a window table at Incontro Ristorante in San Ramon, you can see across the street to a Kentucky Fried Chicken. Beyond the fluorescent image of the smiling colonel, traffic rushes by on 680. A glimpse of Mount Diablo in the distance does little to redeem the view. But what Incontro, which opened in June, lacks in scenery, it more than makes up for with excellent food.

Call Incontro for a reservation, and the “buona sera” that greets you is the first sign of this restaurant’s best feature: authenticity. Both owners are Italian, and bold, simple fare from their homeland is the rule in the kitchen. Cooks make the ravioli by hand, bake the bread fresh daily, and finish many dishes with a drizzle of imported extra virgin olive oil. “We do not alter the cuisine,” co-owner Gianni Bartoletti says. “If a recipe calls for three ingredients, we use three, not four.”

On our visit, appetizers included an orange-marinated salmon carpaccio on a bed of crisp shaved fennel and a salad of fresh mozzarella, arugula, and prosciutto. The kitchen’s attention to detail was evident in the spice: A sprinkling of green peppercorns gave the salmon a surprising kick, and peppery arugula, quality Parma ham, and a perfectly balanced vinaigrette made the delicate flavor of the mozzarella on the salad sing.

The name Incontro, Italian for encounter, represents the meeting of the restaurant’s two owners, who hail from opposite ends of the boot. Bartoletti was born in Rivera, a rural village in the northwestern mountains of Piedmont. He wears his dark hair slicked back, a blue button-down shirt crisply tucked, and a fine gold ring in each ear. When he describes the salmon carpaccio, he punctuates the explanation with a kiss of his fingertips.

His business partner, Luigi Troccoli, whose graying hair and silky shirts waft loosely behind him, grew up in Bari, a hot coastal city in the south. Traditional dishes from both ends of Italy—and points in between—populate the menu. We loved the northern-inspired veal medallions served tender and smooth with thick slices of salty prosciutto and tangy provolone. A seafood fettuccine seasoned with saffron and tomatoes practically makes you feel a southern breeze.

Incontro’s wine list also spans the length of Italy. You’ll find white wine from Alto Adige in the north and red wine from Basilicata in the south. Most bottles are reasonably priced between \$25 and \$45.

Diners are fortunate that Incontro’s owners found their way to the restaurant industry. Bartoletti, the son of an iron factory worker, narrowly escaped a career in construction by attending the Enrico Maggia Culinary School in Stresa. Thereafter, he worked on a cruise ship. After four years working in England’s restaurant industry, he phoned an American woman he had dated on the cruise ship. Within months, they were married and living in San Francisco (they’ve since had children and moved to Concord).

Troccoli was weaned on soccer and fishing in the large, laid-back city of Bari. In his early twenties, he came down with a case of the travel bug, touring cities around the world before settling in San Francisco in 1990.

Although both Bartoletti and Troccoli left Italy at the same time, and then later lived in London for several years, it was not until they reached California that their encounter began. As the two worked side by side in San Francisco’s restaurant business for 10 years, they say their north-south differences blended easily into friendship. “We just think alike,” the two say, practically in unison.

The duo’s confidence and ambition are apparent at Incontro, even though a few small glitches occurred on our visit. House-made tagliatelle with clams is a real treat, but the butter-sage sauce on our spinach and ricotta ravioli arrived in oily beads around the pasta—clearly the dish was left sweating under the heat lamp while our asparagus risotto simmered. Then, after much talk from the owners about the mascarpone and ladyfingers in the tiramisu, the kitchen ran out of the dish.

But during dessert, Troccoli stopped by our table. We chatted about the imported amarena (wild cherry) preserves on the silky panna cotta and the house-made chocolate sauce zigzagging over our amaretto semifreddo—a flavorful pyramid of frozen mousse.

Bartoletti and Troccoli vow that they will always be available at their restaurant. “We put a lot of time into this,” Bartoletti says with determination. “We are here to stay.”