

Il Fornaio in Manhattan Beach: Fresh Food and Friendly Service

It is springtime. And when I think of spring, thoughts of fresh garden vegetables in great dishes come to mind. Great ingredients, nicely prepared meats, and friendly service?.. it must be time for a visit to Il Fornaio in Manhattan Beach.

Even though the Il Fornaio restaurant chain has branches all over the world, each location has a special twist to it. The South Bay branch on Rosecrans Avenue has the feel of a locally owned family spot. The first thing you will notice when you arrive is Chef/Owner Vicente Mendoza is everywhere. Not only is he directing the fast-moving staff in the spectacular open kitchen, but he is keeping a keen eye on the service folks and making sure the customers are well taken care of too. He treats this place like it is his own.

One of the things I have always liked about the Il Fornaio way of doing things is their continual updating of the menu. Each season brings a new take on Italian cooking. Their special fare is chock full of interesting things to enjoy.

Balsamic vinegar and olive oil soaked nicely into warm, hearty bread. Mozzarella di Bufala alla Caprese (Italian style mozzarella with vine-ripened tomatoes, basil, oregano, sea salt, and olive oil) was the first taste. Great mozzarella is soft and silky. This fit the bill nicely. Next up was a lightly-breaded and fried

zucchini with two sauces: spicy marinara and parsley. Both were flavorful but the parsley had a nice kick to it that really stood out.

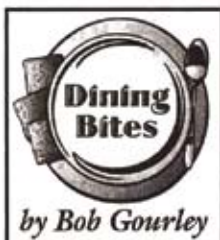
Other antipasti selections include deep fried calamari, braised beef with onion served over polenta, and thinly sliced raw beef with capers, wild arugula, and lemon olive oil. Prices range from \$7.50 to \$13.95 for the sampler plate.

Soups are made in-house and include seasonal vegetable minestrone and a non-dairy choice prepared daily. A tasty salad is Insalata del Bietole for \$8.50.

Organic red and gold beets with red wine vinegar are mixed with wild arugula, toasted walnuts and Asiago cheese with a lemon olive oil dressing, which is prepared daily.

After the appetizers I couldn't wait for the entrees. Chef Vicente picked out two outstanding dishes. The first from the rotisserie and grill menu was the Petto di Pollo al Peperoncino (\$18.95). A grilled double chicken breast covered with a rub of sage, rosemary, thyme, crushed red pepper, white wine, and Dijon mustard was very moist, juicy, and tasty. I really enjoyed the slight grill flavor and the mix of spices. Roasted Yukon gold potatoes and sautéed organic spinach with tomatoes and onions expertly completed this offering.

Sogliola con Limone e Capperi (\$24.95), baked



whole wild petrale sole with capers, lemon, olive oil sauce, and sea salt arrived on a separate plate. Soon the server deboned the fish tableside, a nice touch. Sole has a very delicate flavor. And this piece was sumptuous and went very well with the lemon sauce. Mashed potatoes and sautéed carrots added to the experience.

Additional grilled favorites to stimulate your palette include Bistecca alla Fiorentina (\$33.95). A huge 22-ounce porterhouse steak is served with organic spinach, roasted potatoes, and uccelletta cannellini beans. Scaloppine con Marsala e Funghi (\$19.95) is thinly pounded veal sautéed with porcini and oyster mushrooms and then finished with soft polenta and broccolini.

Pizzas are made with homemade dough and mozzarella imported from Italy. The Fradiavola (\$13.50) has cheese, tomato sauce, Italian sausage, mushrooms, bell peppers, red onions, and spicy peperoncino oil. Raviolis and lasagna are prepared in-house.

The huge dessert cart makes for some tempting choices. I had to have the



Budino di Pane (\$7.50). Il Fornaio's version of bread pudding. This take features granny smith apples, golden raisins, figs and brandy served with crème anglaise and vanilla ice cream. The figs were a pleasant surprise. A decadent cup of crème brulee and chocolate decadence went down very well. Other endings include tiramisu, crepes filled with apples and grappa, pastry cream, vanilla sauce, and caramel sauce, and an assortment of gelatos.

For Happy Hour buffs don't miss their free selection of anti pasta goodies served Monday through Friday from 5:00PM to 6:30PM. It is a great way to end the day.

A very tempting weekend brunch menu will entice you as well. Items range from \$6.95 to \$25.00. Tosto Italiano is an Italian style toast made with sweet bread, mascarpone cheese, fresh strawberries and syrup. Pasta, pizza, and grilled items fill out the fare.

Go enjoy the pleasant days of spring with freshly prepared food at Il Fornaio. Il Fornaio, Monday-Thursday 11:30AM-10:00PM, Friday 11:30AM-11:00PM, Saturday 11:00AM-11:00PM, Sunday 11:00AM-10PM, 1800 Rosecrans Ave., Manhattan Beach, (310) 725-9555, www.ilfornaio.com.

• Bob Gourley has been doing restaurant reviews for over 20 years. He is currently heard nationally on *Issues Today Radio* and locally on *KTYM 1460AM*