

D I N I N G

FROM ABALONE TO ZABAGLIONE

ITALIAN HOLIDAY

Il Fornaio's regional menu an impressive culinary journey

BY MERRILL SHINDLER
SPECIAL TO RAVE!

Hacking ones way down chaotic Rosecrans Avenue, it's easy to forget that one of the very best Italian restaurants in Southern California is found in the same shopping center as the wonderful REI, and the even more wonderful Trader Joe's.

Il Fornaio doesn't have the cartoon glitz of Romano's Macaroni Grill across the street. Instead, it has the sort of culinary patina that comes from doing things right.

Walking into the restaurant, with its pale yellow lighting, open kitchen, high ceiling, appealing bar and white-jacketed waiters, it's easy to forget that Manhattan Beach is outside the door. It could be Florence or Milan or Rome. This is an Italian experience that's both urban and urbane — and possibly better than it's ever been before.

These days, those who work in the area can wander in between 5 and 7 p.m. Monday through Thursday, and nibble on complimentary slices of very good pizza, along with a constantly changing selection of antipasti, with their glasses of Pinot Grigio, their Negroni, their Bellini, their Prosecco or their Grappa.

The selection of wines by the glass is fine, though somewhat oddly, Italian wines are in the minority — just three of the nine whites are Italian, and three of the nine reds. Now, I rather like California wines. But I like Italian wines as well. And this would be a good chance to taste a few new ones. But then, I quibble... as ever.

In terms of the regular menu, it's actually quite simple, though very well conceived. There is, of course, bread baked in house every day, served with some lovely extra virgin olive oil, almost a meal in itself. Bread reappears in several forms among the appetizers as well. There's the bruschetta al pomodoro, which is made with the house ciabatta bread topped with tomatoes, garlic, basil and olive oil. And there's the rustichella, a very fine pizza variant of flatbread loaded down with goat cheese, mozzarella, tomatoes, onions, olives, herbs and spices.

They do a good stuffed artichoke here (carciofini ripieni), packed with bread crumbs, Parmesan and crispy chunklets of calamari served with pesto sauce. And the squid reappears as calamaretti fritti, and in the grilled seafood appetizer of calamari, scallops and shrimp.

There's a multi-item antipasto della casa as well, which has only a little overlap with other dishes on the menu, a nice touch. It's a sampling of goat cheese wrapped in smoked salmon, scallops wrapped in pancetta bacon, eggplant salad, salad caprese, melon with prosciutto, artichoke and bruschetta, very

REVIEW



PAUL PENZELLA/DAILY BREEZE

Il Fornaio ★★½

Gateway Shopping Center, 1800 Rosecrans Ave., Manhattan Beach, 310-725-9555. Italian. Lunch and dinner, every day; brunch, Sunday. Full bar. Convenient parking. Reservations essential. Appetizers, \$5.95-\$10.95. Entrees, \$9.95-\$23.95. Cards: MC, V.

Good Choices:

Rustichella Flat Bread.....	\$7.95
Grigliata-Costa Smeralda.....	\$9.95
Antipasto della Casa.....	\$10.95
Insalata Ruchetta.....	\$8.50
Pizza Quattro Stagioni.....	\$10.95
Gnocchi Gratinati.....	\$12.95
Lasagna Ferrarese.....	\$13.95
Turtei Pasta Con Aragosta.....	\$17.95
Pollo Toscano.....	\$15.95
Tagliata Chianina Beef.....	\$21.95

OUR RATINGS

- ★★★★ As good as it gets — a great restaurant we should be proud to have in our city.
- ★★★ Terrific — fine for special occasions.
- ★★ Good — bring the whole family.
- ★ OK.

good for sharing with the whole table.

There are properly thin, crackerlike pizzas. Salads abound. The pastas are some of the best in town, especially the shrimp and potato gnocchi, and the gloriously complex lasagna Ferrarese with its mix of meat ragu and porcini mushrooms.

Their rotisserie chicken reminds me of my contention that there's no better dish in the world than a perfectly done roasted chicken; no truffles or caviar ever tasted this good. And there's a big 18-ounce rib eye done in the Tuscan style.

You can eat very well ordering from the regular menu at Il Fornaio. But what I really

want to praise is the Festa Regionale menu, a two-week journey taken every month to a different region of Italy. So far this year they've been to Lazio in January, Umbria in February, Calabria in March, The Marches in April, Tuscany in May, Sardegna in June — and coming up, the mountainous Basilicata region of the south, Thursday to July 18.

What's so impressive about the Festa Regionale at Il Fornaio isn't just the obsessive care with which the restaurant goes from region to region, covering parts of Italy whose food we rarely encounter — it's that they make it a fully encompassing experience.

In each case, the menu is prepared by the chef who grew up in that region. We get the chef's bio as well as a culinary story of the region.

For each region, the restaurant prepares authentic breads eaten by the local populace — in the case of Sardegna, it was a potato focaccia topped with tomato, onions and oregano; in the case of Basilicata, it's a crusty, flat pane casereccio.

Beyond that, there's a soup — for Basilicata, a zuppa di fagioli bianchi, a white bean soup with onions, sage, garlic and grilled garlic croutons.

There are a trio of antipasti to choose from — for Basilicata, insalata di Mamma Carmela (an heirloom tomato salad with aged ricotta, cucumber, onions, olives, basil and oregano), carpaccio di tonno (thinly sliced ahi with fennel and caperberries), and involtini di melanzane (eggplant rolled with goat cheese). Then comes a choice of three pastas — ravioli filled with Italian sausage; rigatoni with eggplant and tomato ragu, topped with scamorza and pecorino cheeses; and risotto with shrimp, scallops, calamari and asparagus.

And for a Basilicata main course, there's a selection of nasello (bluenose sea bass) baked with tomatoes; grilled chicken breast marinated with sage, rosemary, thyme, and crushed red peppers; and lamb shanks braised in Sangiovese wine.

And speaking of wines, there's a selection of at least two per month, one red, one white. In the case of Basilicata, it's Greco di Tufo Terredora and Aglianico del Vulture.

Like I said, it's an immersion in the region, lacking only local musicians, and perhaps the waiters speaking in the local dialect. After Basilicata, there's Venice in August, Sicily in September, Emilia-Romagna in October, Campania in November, and a "Best of 2004" in December.

There's also a "Passaporto," where you can record your meals in each region. Fill out the whole thing, and you get a ceramic plate as a gift. One monthly diner wins a trip for two to Italy — though I'm not sure the food is any better over there than it is here at Il Fornaio.

■ Merrill Shindler talks about restaurants from 5 to 7 p.m. Saturday and Sunday on KLSX-FM 97.1.

GOOD TASTE



RAVE!