



Cover

DINING

MARIN SCOPE, MILL VALLEY HERALD,
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Il Fornaio: The tastes of Italy, one region per month

Ratings:

Food ★★★
Atmosphere ★★★
Service ★★★
Noise Level ★★
Overall ★★★

Prices: appetizers \$7.75-8.95,
entrees \$11.25-\$21.2

UPSIDE: Excellent food and service, diverse presentation of regional Italian dishes, outstanding baked goods, quiet, spacious setting.
DOWNSIDE: Risotto on heavy side, overuse of cheese, shopping-center location somewhat offputting.

SYMBOLS: Food, atmosphere, service: ★ poor, ★★ good, ★★★ excellent, ★★★★ exceptional. Noise level: ★ soft, ★★ tolerable, ★★★ What'd you say?

Il Fornaio, 233 Corte Madera Town Center, Corte Madera. Open Mon.-Fri. 11:30-10 (Fri. to 11) for lunch and dinner, Sat. 9 a.m.-11 p.m., Sun. 9 a.m.-10 p.m. Bakery hours 6:30 a.m.-10 p.m. (7 a.m. Sat. and Sun.) Reservations suggested. Phone 927-4400. On the web at ilfornaio.com.

SAUL ISLER
DINING CRITIC

It's one thing to succeed with a single upscale restaurant, quite another to keep the links solid in a chain of 23. But that's exactly what legendary restaurateur Larry Mindel accomplished before handing off Il Fornaio to new COO Mike Hislop in 2001. Today, the chain continues to expand throughout California and in Nevada, Colorado and Washington.

Recently, Mindel's VP-marketing son Michael and chef-partner C.J. Snyder invited me to

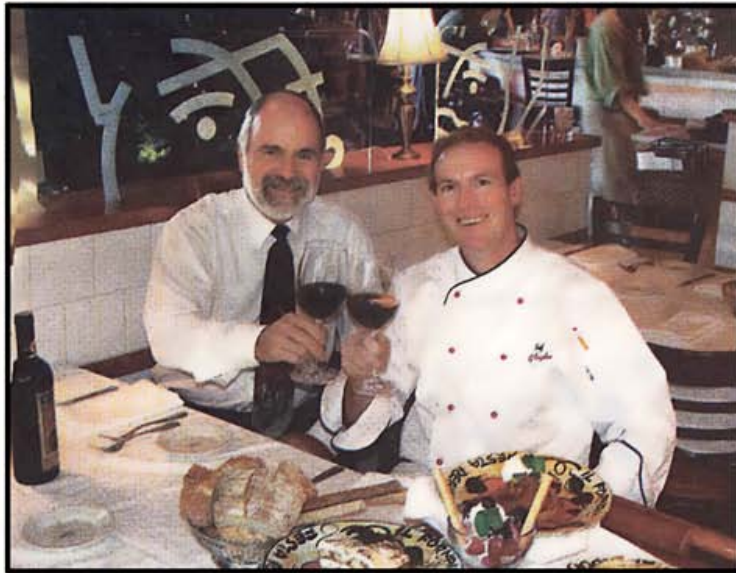
sample one of their Corte Madera Town Center eatery's regional Italian cuisines, presented one fortnight every month. So this evening Susan and I are "visiting" Piemonte, the northwest region known for its fontina cheese, risotto, polenta and rare white truffles at a tasting normally offered only to parties of six or more.

Our repast begins with the delicious warm bread that prompts the Il Fornaio ("The Bakery") name. Though walnut-and-fig bread with anise is featured, the best is the simple, sweet Italian. All is half-baked at an area Il Fornaio bakery and finished where served. Better, fresher pane I've yet to taste.

Our first antipasto is soup: garbanzo bean with pancetta, onions, potatoes, ciabatta croutons and fontina cheese, otherwise excellent but for its redolence of marjoram. The lightness of the salad (hearts of romaine, shaved parmesan, anchovies with a perfect hard-boiled-egg dressing) provides a nice balance to the heartier soup. But it's the polenta cunsa, with baked toma and fontina cheeses, mushrooms, sage and a superb white truffle sauce, that tops all.

Next up, a taste of four primi: This incredible, wood-fire-baked cannelloni is a large tube of pasta filled with prosciutto, mortadella, veal, spinach and parmesan with tarragon béchamel white-truffle oil. Then comes a tasteful if heavy risotto, a too-rich, fontini-filled house-made ravioli in a porcini-mushroom sauce with white truffle and, finally, melt-in-the-mouth gnocchetti: the tenderest of potato dumplings served with sage, onions, tomato and parmesan under an exquisite braised-rabbit ragout. Would room remain for the secondi?

It would.
The first is breaded ham-and-fontina-stuffed chicken breast in a Dijon mustard-brandy sauce with a surround of



Managing partner at Il Fornaio in Corte Madera Michael McCarthy, left, and Chef C.J. Snyder (also a partner) toast their restaurant, a successful concern since 1987. photo by Privette

mash and vegetables, including aspiration broccoli, which is more asparagus than broccoli. Whether it's the cheese or the truffle oil, I find this dish so rich as to feel its lingering aftereffects later in the evening. The second is more to my liking: pork loin rolled with figs and sage and roasted with thyme and another personal nonfavorite, rosemary. The pork, however, is most tender and its side of crisp roasted potatoes, excellent. Best of all is the filet of striped sea bass with thyme and green grapes in a smooth champagne-vinegar sauce, sided with creamy mashed potatoes and sautéed vegetables.

The menu's suggested wines

for each dish, selected from the bottomless Il Fornaio cellars, are well chosen. True to theme, each is from a different town in Piemonte: an elegant white from Gavi and rich reds from Alba and Asti. Prices range from \$7.75 to \$16.50 by the glass to \$39-\$66 for the bottle.

Dessert (\$6.50) is a delicious if filling Arborio rice tort with Frangelico pastry cream, hazelnuts and crème anglaise.

Piemontese, because of its dairy and rice emphasis, is not my favorite among the regional foods of Italy. But next year, I can choose from Friuli, Umbria, Trentino, Liguria, Sardegna, Basilicata, Veneto, Puglia, Sicily and Lombardia as well,

including the sine qua non of Italian regions, Tuscany.

With almost perfect service (we had to request slower delivery of our first dishes) and a spacious, beautiful and quiet setting, it's easy to forget that Il Fornaio is not a one-of-a-kind dining establishment, a fact that must please, no end, the world beyond Marin.

Regional or regular, I urge you to put an Il Fornaio menu before you.

Got something to say?
Punch me out at:
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TABLE SCRAPS

• A recent New York Times Style magazine piece entitled "All Stirred Up" notes that bitters in martinis are making a comeback, and that martinis so made should be "stirred, not shaken." Nice to know, since I've made mine with bitters, and stirred, for the maybe 40 years since I've been slugging it down nightly at 6. Never knew I was so hip.

• In the same mag (11/6), St. Alice Waters, Our Lady of the Fresh and Simple, was berated for making the Bay Area restaurant scene more derivative of her vaunted Chez Panisse style than it is innovative and daring. Even the French Bakery's Thomas Keller — he of the three Michelin stars newly bestowed upon his Manhattan eatery, Per Se — is chaffed for relying more on local/fresh sources than upon his own imagination. Blasphemy? Read it for yourself at nytimes.com and decide. Then send your angry e-mails to the Times, not to me. By the way, the Michelin is coming to the Bay Area as we speak. Can't wait for the uproar.

• Restaurants frequently invite critics to try them out. Can an honest review result when the restaurant pays the tab? It can and does. It chances that I'll like it but, if I don't, I chance that I'll never be invited to it or any other restaurant again. The point is that you're not taking a chance. My reviews contain nothing less than my honest opinion. You're not taking a chance they're otherwise.