

Emilia-Romagna Inspires Bertolino to Do It His Way

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Dinner out with some friends recently took us to Modo Mio at Newport Coast's Crystal Cove Promenade.

And I needed to try this six-month-old restaurant anyway.

A gentleman with a nice smile, owner Gian Franco Bertolino, greeted us at the bustling restaurant. He handed a waiter four menus and a wine list and we were led to a table in the corner.

The name of the restaurant means "My Way" and it is Franco's way to serve food that is true to the culture of his hometown of Modena in the Emilia-Romagna region.

Modena is famed for its fine olive oils, top quality balsamic vinegars and cheeses.

Thus the dishes here are prepared with savory olive oil that spreads its personality widely and deliciously. This is Franco's second restaurant. He's had another Modo Mio on Sunset Boulevard in Pacific Palisades since 1997.

Our waiter, Scott, turned out to be friendly, informative and professional. We decided to order Saintsbury 2003 Carneros Pinot Noir, a wine that I selected because it can match many foods and is a well-crafted wine with good balance, definitive body, sleek layering of flavors and a smooth, rich overall character.

We began with the bresaola appetizer, air-dried beef that's sliced thinly, drizzled with olive oil and centered with a little mound of chopped arugula.

We also tried the torta rustica, a pie-like wedge of crispy pastry shell baked with a filling of spinach, ricotta and prosciutto.

It was a fine dish of Italian country personality, especially with the puree of onion skimming the edges of each bite.

Still in appetizer mode, we ordered a plate of roasted bell peppers of various colors with goat cheese rounds and chopped, sun-dried tomatoes. It was everyone's favorite, a liting melange of olive oil and sweet pieces of vegetable playing off the slight tang of the goat cheese and the chewier texture of the tomato bits.

Also winning was the calamari that was sauteed in a light tomato sauce dotted with black olives and capers.

The menu lists four risottos. I ordered the chef's special of risotto with sausage. We also decided to compare it with the seafood risotto. The creamy rice dishes were strewn adequately with pieces of sausage and several kinds of seafood.

Two of the evening's entree specials were swordfish with roasted potatoes and seasonal vegetables and ravioli stuffed with lobster, shrimp and crab. We loved those two dishes.

The swordfish was tender and superb in taste beneath a glaze of fresh tomato sauce. The ravioli featured large rounds that filled the plate and they were topped by a chunky melange of full flavored tomatoes kissed with olive oil. The trio of shellfish that contributed to the stuffing made the ravioli a star attraction.

As for dessert, we found the tartufo excellent. This is the most summery of Italian desserts, a frozen truffle comprised of a ball of frozen gelato with a middle of soft chocolate and an outer coating of crunchy nuts.

Writing this, I am reminded again of the hospitality here. It's really about the food on the plate and the good service that makes it all the more enjoyable.

Oh, yes, and the prices are absolutely right. Just so you know, I chose not to name our companions because he is a seasoned restaurant owner who is happy to dine incognito. He and his wife have a track record of knowing really good food when they find it.