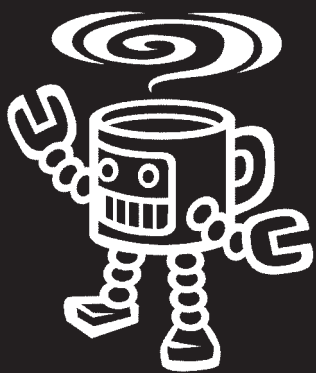


Cafe



Primo Pitch

BY ROSE MARTELLI

Trattoria Branica

10411 Clayton Road, Frontenac; 314-432-8585.
Hours: Lunch 11 a.m.-2 p.m. Mon.-Fri. Dinner 5-10 p.m. Mon.-Sat., 4-9 p.m. Sun.

What we do for the veal *al limone* is, we take a nice scallop cut of milk-fed veal, and we'll pound that nice and thin, marinate it in a little white wine and lemon sauce.... Now, I also have the *stufato di Sam*. Now, that's beef tenderloin tips that we've slow-stewed with tomatoes, a touch of white wine, some celery. We let some onions sweat in there, and then we plate that on a bed of creamy risotto. It's a very heavy but very delicious dish...."

I love it when waiters talk like that, guiding me through a menu in an impassioned first-person account, serving up the straight dope on ingredients and preparation but in rhapsodic tones (often accompanied with enthusiastic hand gestures) so I can practically taste each dish by its description alone, hear it sizzling in the pan, fall in love with it sight unseen.

Of course, none of this means the place is any good. What initially comes across as a gastronomic passion play can feel, in retrospect, like a snake-oil sales pitch if what arrives at the table doesn't live up to its prologue. You start to think all those huzzahs were merely meant to brainwash you into believing you'd be chowing down on superlative victuals. Perhaps the grand show the maitre d' made in escorting you to your table and pulling out your chair was just another part of the act.

I am happy to report that none of that is the case at **Trattoria Branica**, which has, in a mere two months of existence, shot out of the gate as one of the most exceptional Italian restaurants in St. Louis.

Maybe it was our waiter's enchanting spiel — pretty much what I wrote above — that made Trattoria Branica's traditional menu sound exotic and novel. In its written form, the menu lists the traditional four courses: antipasti (appetizers, including an antipasto platter), insalati (salads), a pasta first course and a meat-based second course. There's lots of white-wine cream sauces, shaved Parmesan and capers, not to mention minestrone, spaghetti pomodoro and chicken Marsala. Within those parameters, though, some neat tweaks come to light. I thoroughly enjoyed the appetizer of *gamberi ala Monica* (named after owner Sam Kacar's daughter): three very big sautéed shrimp plated with fresh artichoke hearts, cooked spinach leaves and a touch of garlic in a

white wine-lemon sauce. The whole shebang hit the palate with a bang, coalescing into a piquant, smoky flavor nicely offset by the verdant spinach.

Insalata Caprese — typically red, vine-ripened tomatoes, cow's-milk mozzarella, basil leaves and a drizzle of olive oil — is transformed here into *pomodoro et melanzane*, a yummy array of sliced red and yellow tomatoes, delish fresh mozz, confetti shreds of basil, sprinkles of both olive oil and balsamic vinegar (which some consider overpowering and therefore sacrilegious, but which packs a well-tempered punch here) and, most curiously, fingers of breaded eggplant. While I appreciated the idea behind that last ingredient, it contributed sadly little in taste or texture.

Fried calamari came in a lightly done, blond breading with a cup of garlic aioli and, out of nowhere, a paper-thin slice of rind-on lemon tempura that was very cool to look at and bracing to eat. The carpaccio may not have been the most tissue-soft I've ever sampled, but it was wonderful all the same, topped with shaved Parmesan, capers, red onions and some crostini along the plate's large lip.

Escolar may be the new tilapia — a cheap,

versatile fish that pops up at a wide variety of ethnic restaurants around town. Both species are put to use at Branica. The tilapia comes in the form of an audacious lunch-only entrée served over a bed of mellow-yet-bitter escarole with a reduction of lemon and verdicchio (the latter a tart white Italian wine.) A frequent fish of the day at Branica, the escolar is served simply: a grilled fillet with a little lemon. The result was upstanding but falls short of outstanding — especially when matched against a luscious salmon entrée topped with fresh tomatoes and

capers. Both fish dishes were sided by a helping of smashed Yukon gold potatoes. While "smashed" usually amounts to nothing more than a meaningless grammatical perversion, somehow the label fits here; these potatoes, with their skins left on and unburdened by loads of cream and butter, tasted like savory Yukon golds that'd been stomped like grapes.

Pasta that's been correctly prepared is almost always great. When that pasta is made from scratch daily, in-house and cut by hand, it can be mind-altering: You can't imagine ever eating anything else. That's the kind of pasta you get at Trattoria Branica. *Tortelloni di pollo* — a dish I didn't even think I'd like — was a winner, featuring tortelloni as big as fortune cookies coated with a fantastic, slightly salty cream sauce dotted with peas. *Pappardelle golose*, tossed with shrimp, scallops, spinach, asparagus and tomatoes, came bathed in a Cognac cream sauce that, curiously, sometimes tasted like a Thai peanut sauce and at other times like the color beige. I had to go in search of the ground beef and sausage on a plate of *linguine bolognese*, but I enjoyed chomping my way through the noodles and tomato sauce while making the journey. Like the pappardelle, *risotto pescatore* boasted scallops as tall as Mount Rushmore and proved a seafood lover's delight: a

bounteous mixture of shrimp, scallops, buttery salmon and a pair of clams nestled in their shells.

One of my favorite parts of eating out at a fancy restaurant — and Trattoria Branica is certainly that, with a floral, mauve-on-mauve, everything-upholstered décor and, on weekends, a pianist and a violinist serenading customers at the small bar up front — comes when the server breaks out the crumber, a.k.a. the table Zamboni. I was delighted at its appearance after our main courses at Branica. Earlier in the meal, though, I hadn't expected our waiter to go so far as to return my entrée to the broiler when I departed for the restroom. And I certainly wasn't anticipating that, during my dining partner's bathroom break,

this same waiter would use my friend's napkin to slap stray crumbs off the seat of his chair before folding it back at his place setting. I thought Italian-restaurant waiters only did that in movies.

For such splendor to be on display in Frontenac, inside a little shopping area called Chateau Village, isn't surprising. Downright shocking, given such environs, are Branica's prices. Only one meat entrée exceeds \$20. Salads are under \$6; all the appetizers but one cost less than \$10. It's quite possible for a party of two to wend its way through four courses plus dessert for under \$100.

Sam Kacar left his managerial post at Dominic's Trattoria in downtown Clayton to open Branica. He brought with him chefs Pepe Profeta (late of the erstwhile Bel-laluna in Kirkwood) and former Cardwell's at the Plaza employee John Komotos. I'm not quite sure how they're managing to pull off their Italian-cuisine grandeur; the food here is so good, mere math and recipes don't explain it all. ●

Trattoria Branica
Gamberi a la Monica \$7.95
Tortelloni di pollo \$10.95
Risotto pescatore \$12.50
Salmon \$17.95



Molto bene: Sam Kacar (pictured) runs one of the most exceptional Italian restaurants in St. Louis.

Jennifer Silverberg