

finedining

By Peter M. Gianotti
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Primi Italian Steakhouse FOOD ★★☆☆

999 Montauk Hwy., West Islip
631-526-9779
primiitalian.com

COST \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

SERVICE Very good

AMBIENCE Very good

ESSENTIALS Dinner, Tuesday to Thursday 5 to 9:30 p.m., Friday and Saturday 5 to 10:30 p.m., Sunday 4 to 9:30 p.m. Closed Monday. Weekend reservations recommended. Major credit cards accepted. Ramp at entrance.

The word “primi” refers to the first dishes in an Italian meal. In West Islip, it signals the main course.

Primi Italian Steakhouse brings together the two most popular cuisines on Long Island, where porterhouse is second only to pasta. The formula: It + St = \$\$\$.

This handsome bucatini-and-beef union brightens a dim stretch of Montauk Highway, just east of the Robert Moses Causeway, as did Nonnina, its Italianate predecessor, which shut last year.

Primi is owned by Frank Bono, formerly of Doppio Artisan Bistro, which closed in Huntington; and local businessman Michael Weber. Consultant Tom Pescuma is a veteran of Doppio, which started in Connecticut and has a seasonal branch in Sag Harbor.

And in the kitchen is Franco Pollini, who cooked at Prime in Huntington and was corporate chef for the New York Yankees. He delivers a solid hit up the middle.

Their beacon already is drawing crowds: Nonnina mourners murmuring where have all the saltimboccas gone; upbeat explorers who’ve found refined chicken scarpariello on a late-winter night; a couple discovering burrata and bliss in the dining room’s lone, coveted alcove.

And there are content imbibers switching from the bar to tables closer to the colorful, vintage posters heralding A. Colussi’s Baicoli Venetian biscuits and Dreher double-malt beer from Trieste, the restorative elixir of China-Rossi and the ideal digestif of Charles Chaplin silent movies.

Plenty of exposed brick, some etched glass and comfortably spaced seating ensure just enough hard surfaces so voices vie with the easy-



Cozy seating faces a lively bar at Primi Italian Steakhouse in West Islip.

going background music. Conversations percolate between the earnest, hovering waitstaff and the eager visitors, who’ve already emptied the bread basket, and downed nuggets of Parmesan cheese, olives plus an enticing amuse of salmon tartare.

The debate begins with pizza Margherita versus chili-oil sparked “diavola” pie. Nobody wins. Bigger appetites prevail and balance a fine appetizer of eggplant Parmigiana with a mild opener of meatballs with red sauce and creamy polenta. Nearby, plump grilled octopus with a diverting purée of black olives competes with the kind of shrimp and crab cocktails you’d go for in a traditional steakhouse. Smiles abound.

And that’s before the ex-Nonninans start twirling Primi’s own primi, particularly the simple, very satisfying cacio e pepe, with aged pecorino cheese and a rush of black pepper, that turns bucatini resolutely Roman; the meaty, generous fettuccine Bolognese; and glossy orecchiette tossed with crumbled sausage and broccoli di rape. Their offspring trend toward the well-dressed arugula salad; mixed greens with sweet Gorgonzola; and a

mint-touched Caesar that doesn’t quite hail with kale.

Sauteed kale accompanies the daily catch of Scottish salmon, good for the risk-averse. Delicate branzino is better, with parsnip purée and hazelnut “caponata.” But harmony eludes a risotto with lobster, which seems only rice topped with shellfish.

By now, the beefeaters are beyond martinis and ready for red meat, which is excellent. The porterhouse for two rivals any in Suffolk; and it’s almost equaled by both the juicy, full-flavored 28-ounce bone-in rib eye, and tender filet mignon. No need to contemplate the uneven sauces, from Bearnaise to salmoriglio.

Besides, your neighbors already are in mid-dessert, with crunchy biscotti, cappuccino-flavored mascarpone dip, gilded additionally with chocolate-covered raisins; and silky Tahitian vanilla panna cotta with amarena cherries, each preferable to either banana-and-Nutella bread pudding or banana cream pie.

Relax, enjoy an espresso or two, maybe an after-dinner beverage. Feel unrushed.

Tonight, Primi is primo.

Primi’s best



Grilled octopus appetizer is served with fingerling potatoes, olive purée. \$18



Bucatini cacio e pepe is topped with shaved aged pecorino cheese and black pepper. \$20



The porterhouse steak for two with fingerling potatoes and sauteed broccoli rabe. \$98



Branzino is served with parsnip purée and hazelnut caponata. \$34



Panna cotta is topped with Tahitian vanilla and amarena cherries. \$12