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A Taste of the Veneto, a Reminder of Home

By PATRICIA BROOKS

DOES Fairfield County need another Italian restaurant? The answer is a resounding “Yes” when it is as distinctive as Cesco’s Trattoria, an eight-month-old spot in Darien named for chef-owner Aldo Chiamulera’s father, who did the same work in the Veneto region of Italy, where Aldo grew up.

Cesco’s has many things going for it: a handy location in the Goodwives Shopping Center; a diverse Northern Italian menu that delivers on most of its promises; and an elegant, welcoming interior. The dining room, with its crisp white napery and polished ladderback chairs, manages to seem at once rustic and formal. The walls are decorated with dozens of antique mirrors and framed photos of Aldo’s family and the Venetian town where the Chiamuleras lived; these homey pictures help personalize the room.

Before opening Cesco’s, his first venture, Aldo Chiamulera worked in Manhattan at Nanni il Vallejo and D’Angelo, and at Arturo’s in Floral Park. So, why choose Darien? I asked him. “Because it reminded me of home, with the woods and deer, everything but mountains,” he said.

Consider starting, as I did on a chilly evening, with a hearty escarole and cannellini bean soup. Or perhaps begin with steamed artichokes, stuffed with capers, bread crumbs and garlic.

Grilled sea scallops, another starter, were charred and plump as expected. They were enhanced by a confetti of chopped brussels sprouts, their strong flavor made gentler and more palatable.

Cesco’s veal meatballs, delicately flavored, super-marble size, were bathed in a freshly stewed tomato sauce. Just as refreshing was a Caprese salad — slices of ethereally gentle buffalo mozzarella, wearing loops of balsamic vinegar, coupled with cherry tomatoes. This dish will be even tastier when ripe heirloom tomatoes are in season.

Fried calamari is about par for its usual course, with a generous portion of lightly breaded and crunchy deep-fried rings and legs. But using a paper funnel inserted into a tall metal stand (as

frites are often served in the French or Belgian manner), did not quite work. The stand was too high, forcing the diner to stretch up awkwardly to spear each bite.

For entrees, Cesco's offers a number of meat, poultry and seafood dishes, but the nine pastas proved just as tempting. Five are available in half portions (at about half the price). This smaller helping, with a starter and dessert, made an ideally sized meal.

Trofi con pesto alla Genovese, a hand rolled flour-and-water pasta, was perfectly cooked al dente and served in a small plate portion in a savory pesto and Pecorino Romano cheese sauce. Like all the pastas I tried, it was under-salted — but not to worry: a waiter appeared with a little tray bearing four different salts: volcanic black and brown salts from Hawaii, pink coral salt from the Himalayas and white sea salt from Italy. Thus we were free to sample pinches of all or choose one to sprinkle over our pasta.

Spaghetti alle vongole, similarly al dente, was blessed with the most succulent, flavorful clams I have had in years. Spaghetti alla carbonara was somewhat muted, though helped by pancetta and a sharp Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese.

A heavenly black truffle beurre blanc sauce would have made almost any dish delicious. It certainly helped the house-made potato gnocchi a lot — but not quite enough to make the somewhat leaden dumplings fully satisfying.

As flavorful as most of the pasta dishes are, they aren't Cesco's only success stories. Veal osso buco, so tender I didn't need a knife to cut it, was a vigorous companion to a serving of risotto Milanese style.

Branzino (sea bass), pan-seared and adorned with a succulent lobster reduction sauce, was totally seductive. The fish was so tasty that it didn't need the shredded brussels sprouts and nubbins of tough gnocchi that accompanied it.

Cesco's desserts are all house-made, and several are notable: a light, flavorful Italian ricotta cheesecake in a blueberry sauce; bread pudding in caramel sauce with a scoop of vanilla gelato; and a rich tiramisù.

All in all, a meal at Cesco's is like recapturing a memory of Italy, at a very reasonable price.

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Cesco's Trattoria

*Goodwives Shopping Center**25 Old Kings Highway North**Darien**(203) 202-9985**cescostrattoria.com***WORTH IT**

THE SPACE A softly lit dining room that seats 48. Ladder-back chairs with rush seats, a wall of banquettes, antique mirrors and white tablecloths. In warm weather there are a few tables for dining in front of the restaurant. Wheelchair access.

THE CROWD Diverse crowd of all ages in casual attire. Waitstaff is well-trained and upbeat.

THE BAR A full bar with a few high stools and tables, located beyond a glass separator from the dining room. A medium-size wine list, with bottles, predominantly regional Italian and California, from \$26, with many in the \$30s and \$40s; 20 wines in 9-ounce carafes, \$12 to \$18 per carafe; small beer list with several craft brews.

THE BILL Lunch: entrees, \$12 to \$25. Dinner: appetizers, \$8 to \$17; entrees, \$14 to \$38; pastas, \$11 (half portions) to \$30; desserts, \$7 and \$8. All major credit cards accepted.

WHAT WE LIKED Escarole and bean soup, insalate Caprese, Cesco's veal meatballs; spaghetti alle vongole, trofi con pesto alla Genovese, pan-seared branzino, veal osso buco with risotto Milanese style; bread pudding in caramel sauce, tiramisu, Italian ricotta cheesecake.

IF YOU GO Lunch: Tuesday through Friday, 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Dinner: Tuesday through Thursday, 5 to 10 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 5 to 11 p.m.; Sunday 4 to 9 p.m. Closed Monday. Large free parking lot. Reservations recommended, especially on weekend nights.

RATINGS Don't Miss, Worth It, O.K., Don't Bother.



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