

Cesco's Trattoria a delightful surprise in Darien

Melanie Barnard

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Goodwives Shopping Center in Darien -- once an ordinary strip mall -- is alive and hopping these days with interesting shops and several fine eateries, the newest being Cesco's Trattoria.

Even though the entire strip has upgraded, it is still an astonishing and pleasing surprise upon entering Cesco's as the ambiance and furnishings are far more indicative of a sophisticated trattoria in Italy.

Indeed, the chef/owner Aldo Chiamulera is from the Veneto region and brings the magical sensibility of Italian dining in the restaurant's charming mix of elegant table settings against a backdrop of framed family photos and heirloom mirrors.

Service and menu here are just as surprisingly elegant and traditional as the setting.

The food is from all regions of Italy; the chef's home Veneto is a special focus, with a beautiful golden saffron risotto as a base for falling-off-the-bone veal osso bucco, as well as a rich and satisfying lobster risotto.

Seafood also abounds along the Adriatic coast, and pan-seared branzino arrives crusty and moist with a rich lobster reduction saucing on a bed of sauteed Brussels sprouts and surrounded by nubs of crispy, deep-fried gnocchi -- another chef's specialty that appears in several dishes here.

Starters at Cesco's are many, ranging from individual antipasta options, priced around \$9, with choices such as homemade eggplant caponata, sauteed Brussels sprouts with pancetta, grilled asparagus, fried zucchini, or sauteed garlicky broccoli rabe. All are lovely, so we'd recommend instead the \$18 assortment of the cold antipasti for sharing at the table.

Hot antipasti include a hearty, homemade but rather bland escarole and bean soup. A hefty grating of Parmegiano cheese helps a lot since the soup -- as well as several of the sauces -- is a bit under salted. The good news is that the waiter brings an assortment of sea salts to the table, though I'd personally rather the dish be properly salted during preparation.

Stuffed artichoke, a homemade specialty of my own Nana, brought me back to my childhood table with garlic, capers and moist breadcrumbs filling each lovely tender leaf. I loved this dish.

Grilled sea scallops are showered with Brussels sprouts shavings (the chef must really like Brussels sprouts) and drizzled with a lightly sweet fig and balsamic vinaigrette. Steamed mussels and fried

calamari are both credible versions of these Italian restaurant standards.

Salads include the expected mozzarella and tomato caprese, Caesar and the now standard beet, goat cheese and balsamic vinaigrette.

Pastas, all nicely prepared, though again a bit under salted, are headlined by light and tender potato gnocchi in a truffled buerre blanc. More homey are traditional lasagna, which again would have earned my Nana's approval, spaghetti with clam sauce or carbonara.

Seafood main courses are more interesting than at many Italian restaurants, as evidenced by grilled swordfish with grilled romaine hearts and soffrito in a ginger-orange vinaigrette, or the house special, lobster served warm, more as a salad with greens, fennel, onions, mango and pomegranate vinegar.

Veal piccata or Marsala, eggplant Parmigiana, chicken Milanese, or roasted rack of lamb round out a rather traditional meat and poultry main course menu.

Desserts here, unlike at many Italian restaurants, are all homemade. All are lovely and worthy, especially a rich, cakelike tiramisu, light ricotta cheesecake and particularly appealing caramel-sauced bread pudding.

Cesco's Trattoria is a contemporary, lighthearted update on traditional, formal Italian restaurants in America. It is a welcome addition to Fairfield County.

CESCO'S TRATTORIA

25 Old King's Highway N., Darien, 203-202-9985, www.cescotrattoria.com

HOURS: Lunch: Tuesday-Friday 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Dinner: Tuesday-Thursday 5-10 p.m.; Friday, Saturday 5-11 p.m.; Sunday 4-9 p.m.

RESERVATIONS: Accepted

CREDIT CARDS: AE, V, MC

PRICES: Dinner appetizers \$15-\$7; main courses \$38-\$18; dessert: \$8-\$7