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## **Hands on and off the beaten track**

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The chicken says it all. Tightly wrapped in darkly mottled sweet-sticky skin. Fragrant with rosemary. Piquant from a long, cold bath in mustard and lemon.

The flesh, both light and dark, is hot and moist — it just left the grill — and it's perfectly salted.

Chef Raul Aguirre worked with owners Gianni Bartoletti and Luigi Troccoli for nearly a decade in San Francisco before opening Incontro last month. They banter back and forth in Italian like brothers. You can tell they're on the same page — hands-on service, honest food, staying true to Italy.

Incontro means encounter: Bartoletti hails from a town near the Swiss border (at the top of the boot), while Troccoli, comes from Puglia, in Italy's heel. They meet in the middle, bringing the flavors of Italy's regions to one place. Some butter. Some tomatoes. Lots of olive oil.

It's more philosophy than style that defines the food. Bread, soup, desserts and pastas are made daily. Sauces are light, complementing judiciously seasoned fresh ingredients. The only flash you'll see is in the owners' eyes (usually in mid-sentence, when they remember an undone task).

Chef Aguirre cooks for an Italian palate. Creamy gnocchi (\$13.50) are flavored with ripe fontina and white truffle oil. Three-day cured salmon (\$8) is scented with orange and rinsed with milk. The firm fish is sliced and presented over fennel curls doused in fruity Italian olive oil so good, you notice. Those aren't tiny capers on the plate — they're green peppercorns, and they pack a punch. Entrees used to come with dandelion greens, but he switched to chard after diners declined the bitter flavor.

Don't miss the caponata (\$8) — a Sicilian relish of onions and eggplant cooked so long and slow, it tastes of honey. Spiked with vinegar and spread thick on toasted slabs of fresh-baked bread, it's finished with salty shavings of ricotta salata.

Grilled flatiron steak (\$19) might be the most tender piece of meat you can find in a restaurant for under \$20. Remarkably soft, almost flabby, the beef is sliced in long thick strips and dangled over a red wine reduction made sweet with shallots and butter. It's delicious.

Our sea bass is naked — dusted with salt and pepper, then sauteed — moist, but not quite pristine. Until Incontro builds a following, keeping stock rotated could be a challenge.

This is just the sort of restaurant anyone would welcome to the neighborhood: small, sincere, with friendly service and simple dishes inspired by good ingredients.

If you wonder why Incontro ended up on a thoroughfare across from KFC, think back to the first time you went house-hunting. Remember that roomy cottage on Shady Lane you liked so much? That quiet one with a yard just a short walk from downtown?

The one you could afford only if you doubled your income?

Bartoletti and Troccoli scoured Contra Costa County for a location for their dream restaurant. And again and again, Bartoletti says he was quoted a rent that left him parched: \$8,000 a month.

With a chef on payroll and two partners creating a livelihood, Incontro would have to run at top speed just to break even. So, for about half that amount, the Italian entrepreneurs settled for a spot that — with no foot traffic or neon signs — can only hope to catch on through word of mouth.

Which way would you have gambled?

History doesn't favor those who've hedged their bets. Since 1999, the cute, low-profile building has been home to Kabob House Too, Awesome Steakhouse, and Boulevard Cafe & Bistro. Maybe none of these were very good. Or maybe the concepts were wrong. Perhaps, in order to prosper, someone just needed to plant an Italian flag outside.

I hope so. Inside is cozy enough. The 60-seat restaurant is bathed in warm yellows hues and has the sort of understated, custom touches that make you feel comfortable, not self-conscious. But it lacks the kind of guts or glamour to inspire a special trip to a colorless boulevard.

Troccoli says most of their customers come from Danville, folks who happen to notice the low-slung building as they travel to San Ramon. Commuters heading the other way probably miss it; those taking the freeway, of course, don't have a chance.

In casual conversation during our anonymous visit, Bartoletti hinted that after building up a clientele, they may be on the lookout for a more visible location. So that's my pitch: Visit Incontro in the hope that their success will allow them to relocate near you.

Reach Times Food editor Nicholas Boer at 925-943-8254 or [nboer@cctimes.com](mailto:nboer@cctimes.com).

Incontro

3 forks

(Value rating)

FOOD

REVIEW VISIT ON JULY 19

CUISINE: Italian.

PRICES: \$\$; pastas \$10-\$15; entrees \$15-\$20.

CHECK: \$188.90 for three, including four courses and two bottles of wine.

HOME RUN: Caponata, chicken, flatiron steak.

STRIKEOUT: Insalata Incontro, tiramisu (both bland).

VEGETARIAN: Lots of choices. Homemade ricotta and spinach ravioli, gnocchi with fontina cheese, capellini pomodoro.

KIDS: No menu, but they're happy to toss pastas with butter or Alfredo sauce.

FREEBIES: Home-baked Italian-style bread with scented olive oil.

BEVERAGES: Small (30 bottles), well-chosen wine list is about 75 percent Italian (two-thirds red). The 2001 Montepulciano (\$49) is smooth and elegant. Most bottles in the \$30 range. No hard liquor.

DESSERTS: Panna cotta (\$7), sweet, but nicely set off with wild, preserved Italian cherries.

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WHO, WHAT, WHEN

WHERE: 2065 San Ramon Valley Blvd., San Ramon.

HOURS: 5:30-9:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Thursdays, 5:30-10 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays; 5-9 p.m. Sundays. Planning to open for lunch in fall.

CONTACT: 925-820-6969.

RESERVATIONS: Suggested.

NOISE LEVEL: Quiet.

SERVICE POINT: Owners are personable and professional, if easily distracted. Busboy, in a wrinkled white shirt, fills in the niches.

PARKING: Lot adjacent to restaurant.

DINING ALONE: Seven-seat bar is well-suited to singles.

SPECIAL AREA: Window tables overlook the busy street; main dining area is more quiet.

PRIVATE PARTIES: Semi-private room has five tables. Parties of 10-12 no problem throughout the restaurant. Can reserve entire restaurant with advance notice.

DATE OPENED: June 6, 2006.

Photo 1. Luigi Troccoli and Gianni Bartoletti are of one mind, but come from opposite ends of Italy. (Doug Duran/Times)

Photo 2. Medaglioni Di Vitello al Prosciutto, Provolone e Vin Santo.

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