



ROSSMOOR NEWS

WALNUT CREEK, CALIFORNIA

Old restaurant reviewer offers her “fave” four

By Maureen O'Rourke News manager

Many residents don't know that I wrote the restaurant reviews for the Rossmoor News for 14 years. Back in 1981, when I was a copy editor at the News, I was asked to write the new restaurant column because I knew how to cook, ate out a lot and enjoyed food (who doesn't?).

The column was called “Share a Fork With O'Rourke” (yes, tacky, but catchy), and to my surprise it took off and became a real hit. I made some mistakes in my early days, but I also did my homework so I would avoid future mistakes. I took cooking classes with many local top chefs, including Hubert Keller of Fleur de Lys, Nancy Oaks of Boulevard and John Ash of John Ash and Company in Santa Rosa. I even worked as a line chef one busy Saturday afternoon at Kuleto's in San Francisco (which I will never do again).

I interviewed chefs, went into their kitchens to find out how they prepared some of their favorite dishes and used many of their techniques in my own kitchen. In addition, I read everything Alice Waters had to say about preparing food.

After 14 years of writing the column, I got burned out - how many different ways can you describe food? And, I really wanted to go out to eat without taking notes and hiding my notebook from the waiters (yes, I got caught a couple of times).

I turned the job over to Wilma Murray because she knows how to cook and appreciates and knows about food and its preparation. I fill in for her once in a while to give her a break, but it is mainly her baby now and she does a great job, especially with ethnic restaurants.

But some residents still remember my early restaurant reviews and ask me to this day to recommend restaurants. I like to patronize the restaurants near my home in Danville and often travel to San Francisco for special occasions to try out the hot spots such as Michael Mina, Gary Danko, Slanted Door and Zuni Café.

For those residents who still want to know, however, here is a list of my favorite places in my neck of the woods. I have found that these restaurants are always consistent with their food and service and inevitably offer me a warm welcome whenever I visit.

INCONTRO RISTORANTE

2065 San Ramon Valley Blvd., San Ramon

925- 820-6969

Open for dinner Tuesday through Sunday

I discovered Incontro a little over a year ago shortly after it had opened along the corridor between Danville and San Ramon. I had eaten my way through Italy the year before and was missing the authentic, fresh regional cuisine of that great country.

Well, what do you know, the same kind of cuisine that you would find at a neighborhood restaurant in Tuscany is served in this unassuming restaurant in San Ramon.

Incontro is run by two friendly Italians (are there any other kind?), Gianni Bartoletti, who is from Northern Italy, and Luigi Troccoli, who is from Southern Italy, and who had worked together in the San Francisco restaurant business for 10 years. They both love their Italian food and wine and both bring that true “flavor” of Italy to their restaurant.

The menu offers the best blend of several regions of Italy. Nightly specials, such as soup, seafood and risotto, are featured on one side of the menu and the other side of the menu remains the same except for a few alterations as the seasons change. For instance, lately a few summer dishes have been thrown into the mix just to keep it interesting for the regulars.

New dishes include a salad of summer corn, baby arugula, black olives and shaved grana cheese in a Meyer lemon dressing, which is a fabulous combination and so delicious; and a homemade ravioli filled with bosc pear and ricotta cheese with a brown butter and sage sauce, which just melts in your mouth.

My favorite dish, which is always on the menu, is the tube pasta with Italian sausages, roasted bell pepper, peas, tomato and cream sauce. This dish is rich and truly Italian. Other great dishes include the homemade potato gnocchi with Fontina cheese and truffle sauce; milk-fed veal filet sautéed with prosciutto and provolone cheese in a Vin Santo sauce; and a grilled flatiron steak in a Dijon mustard and green peppercorn reduction. Prices range from \$7 to \$23, with pasta dishes running about \$15.

Incontro's other plusses include the super friendly service, a knowledgeable staff, a great Italian wine list and a comfortable and casual atmosphere.