



# ROSSMOOR NEWS

WALNUT CREEK, CALIFORNIA

[Print Story](#)

## **New San Ramon restaurant**

is like a trip back to Italy

### **INCONTRO RISTORANTE**

2065 San Ramon Valley Blvd., San Ramon, off Highway 680, exit at Crow Canyon Road

Call: 820-6969

Hours: For dinner only Tuesday through Thursday 5:30 to 9:30 p.m., Friday and Saturday from 5:30 to 10 p.m. and Sunday 5 to 9 p.m.

Reservations: Reservations accepted

Other info: Beer and wine only. Major credit cards accepted.

By Maureen O'Rourke

News manager

As I ate my way through Italy last September, I marveled at the freshness and the rich, earthy flavors of Italian cuisine. The Italians pride themselves on using fresh, simple, seasonal ingredients, and no matter where I ate, from Venice to Tuscany to Rome and the Amalfi Coast, I believe that I sampled some of the best food in Europe.

I have missed the authentic Italian food served in simple, comfortable neighborhood restaurants by people who love food. That is, until now. I rediscovered it, in of all places, San Ramon.

Incontro Ristorante, on a stretch of San Ramon Valley Boulevard between Danville and the heart of San Ramon, offers a dining experience that one would find in many regions throughout Italy. The reason is because the owners, Gianni Bartoletti and Luigi Troccoli, have strong Italian roots.

Bartoletti is from the Northern Italian region of Piemonte, and Troccoli comes from the Southern region of Puglia on the Adriatic. With their restaurant, which means "encounter," they bring the cuisines of the two regions together.

I must admit, when I saw Incontro had taken over a spot that had been several mediocre restaurants over the past few years, I had no intention of giving it a try. I drive by there regularly, and often joked that the long narrow restaurant right on the street had another new name on it. A positive review in the Times convinced me to stop in, and was I surprised on a recent Friday night when I found the restaurant to be totally full with happy diners. I was actually asked if I had a reservation! Reservations were never needed for any of the previous restaurants.

The space has been given a facelift and has the look and feel of a casual café right out of Tuscany. The yellow walls, the dark wood wainscoting, the sconces with the low lighting, the small candles on the tables all give the space a warm, cozy feel. The restaurant is divided up, with one long dining room in the front, so

the noise level is kept down.

The menu is small and manageable and offers the usual three Italian courses-antipasti with soups and salads, pasta dishes, and secondi with hearty meat dishes. There is a nightly "specials" menu offering fresh seafood and risotto. All the dishes are authentic Italian recipes and the ones I tasted on two visits had rich, earthy flavors-what I call real Italian comfort food.

Meals start out with a simple, course country bread with a hard thick crust that softens when dipping it into the olive oil. The bread is made on the premises every day.

I sampled three of the six salads and all were first rate, mainly because the freshest of ingredients were used. My all-time favorite was on the specials menu and was a traditional Tuscan salad called Panzanella Toscana. It is a mixture of organic tomatoes, large green olives, cucumber, red onion, basil and bite-sized chunks of bread tossed in an olive-oil dressing. Large enough to split between two people, this salad was a perfect representation of simple authentic Italian food that you would find at a café in Italy.

The Prosciutto di Parma con Rughetta e Mozzarella (\$8.50) features thinly sliced imported Parma ham, topped with a peppery arugula, which is then topped with a large ball of the creamiest mozzarella I have ever eaten. The combination of the three makes for a really great starter, large enough for two to share.

The Insalata Incontro has an artful presentation with fresh spinach leaves, red peppers, avocado, goat cheese and toasted almonds coated lightly in a balsamic vinaigrette.

Pasta in Italy is the best-fresh, full of flavor and prepared with great sauces, different from the thick red or white sauces served here. When I was there, I always marveled at the great pasta and wondered why such dishes could not be duplicated at our Italian restaurants. Well, it can be done at Incontro. The freshness of the pasta came across on the very first bite and the sauces are like no other sauces that are found at local Italian restaurants.

The Mostaccioli al Carroccio (\$11) is a creamy dish made with tube pasta, Italian sausages, roasted bell pepper, peas, tomato sauce and cream, served piping hot. This traditional dish features perfect al dente pasta, morsels of ground meat scattered throughout, and a creamy sauce-the combination melted in my mouth.

A house specialty is the Gnocchi all Piemontese (\$13.50), homemade potato gnocchi with imported Fontina cheese and truffle sauce. This is a dish from the Piemonte region in Northern Italy where truffles, gnocchi and cheese reign supreme. This dish was very rich, but has got to be the best gnocchi around.

On my first visit, I enjoyed a dish on the special menu, thick and creamy risotto with fresh shrimp, and it, like the other pasta dishes, was very rich and full of flavor. Other pasta dishes, which are priced from \$10.50 to \$15, include homemade spinach and ricotta cheese ravioli served in a butter and sage sauce; tagliarini pasta with Manila clams in a sauce of white wine, garlic and parsley; and angel hair tossed with organic tomatoes and basil.

There are only four selections in the secondi course on the regular menu, and my guest and I were able to sample two of them.

The standout dish has got to be the Medaglioni di Vitello al Prosciutto-milk-fed veal medallions sautéed with Prosciutto and provolone cheese in an intriguing Vin Santo sauce (\$18.50) The veal is tender and given a needed punch with the ham, cheese and the light sauce. The dish is served with sliced yellow potatoes, which have so much more flavor than russets, and a mixture of green and yellow beans.

The grilled flatiron steak (\$19) with the Italian name of Tagliata di Bue, is prepared in a tarragon, shallots and red wine reduction and served with harmonious side dishes of cannellini beans and sautéed vegetables. The presentation is lovely, and the steak had a lot of flavor, but was on the tough side, but that's usually the

texture of flatiron steak. The cannellini beans, which you rarely find on local menus, are simply prepared with a toss of olive oil and perfectly cooked-just like I enjoyed in Italy.

All desserts are \$7 and have that Italian flair. The chocolate layered terrine with creme anglaise and raspberry sauce was actually quite light and by far the best of the two we sampled. The vanilla gelato in a pool of espresso and topped with whipped cream could have used more gelato and less whipped cream, but it was a satisfying top-off to a very good meal. Other desserts include tiramisu, gelato and frozen mousse.

There is a bit of a bar, right there as you walk in the door, but the restaurant only serves wine and beer. The wine list is short, but there are a few good selections of Italian wine.

Our service, mainly by waiters with thick Italian accents, was very good and attentive, and the owners were always around asking customers about their food. The restaurant has an upbeat and positive atmosphere, making it easy for diners to yearn to return.

I will make many return visits to Incontro. I just can't pass up the uncomplicated beloved Italian classics that remind me of the food that I enjoyed so much in Italy.