

A warm welcome to Italian fare

Jennifer Tomaro, Special to the Chronicle
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I'VE ALWAYS IDENTIFIED THE COMING OF FALL with my mother cranking out piles of doughy gnocchi onto the tiled countertops. One weekend per year, she would make pounds of the pasta, which she would store and use throughout the cooler months.

No one's gnocchi has ever been as good as my mother's, but occasionally a restaurant, such as Incontro Ristorante in San Ramon, comes close.

In Italian, "incontro" means to encounter, and for co-owners and business partners Gianni Bartoletti and Luigi Troccoli, interacting with diners is the foundation of the restaurant. The pair combines the cuisine of Northern Italy (where Gianni comes from) and Southern Italy (where Luigi is from), and creates a warm environment that welcomes guests as they enter through the archway into the restaurant.

With pale yellow walls, ceramic tile floors and cottage-esque appointments, the interior of Incontro is pleasant -- a sharp contrast to the exterior's squat fast-food image. Its last occupant was Kabob House Too.

Incontro has been open only since June, but you'd think it had been around for years.

The homey decor, and pastas, further that impression. Textured ridges of the irregularly shaped potato gnocchi (\$14) cling to the creamy fontina cheese sauce with earthy undercurrents of black truffle. The dish is decadent and even though the gnocchi were slightly overcooked, I cleaned my plate.

Another house-made pasta, tagliarini with Manila clams (\$15), had a complementary al dente texture that absorbed the light white wine and garlic sauce. Perfectly cooked clams paired nicely with the pasta, but it needed another textural element, like crispy prosciutto or bacon. The mostaccioli (\$11.50), featuring pasta tubes that were not house-made, also needed tweaking. The pasta scooped up the sweet and well-balanced tomato-cream sauce, but the Italian sausage was grainy and there was only a scant sprinkling of peas.

Not everything at Incontro is pasta. The herb-rubbed roasted half chicken (\$16.50) is so tender that the meat falls off the bone in rosemary scented chunks. Pan-fried potatoes, finished in the oven, and a well-executed seasonal squash assortment complete the dish. The flaky white meat of the sauteed petrale sole (\$17), a special one night, is highlighted with lemon and topped with plump capers and puckery caper berries. The potatoes also make an appearance, along with sauteed Swiss chard.

Lingering over a meal at Incontro is easy to do with antipasti options such as the prosciutto di Parma plate (\$9.50), a colorful trio of fresh buffalo mozzarella, peppery arugula and prosciutto. A special of white bean soup (\$6) is also nicely done, with whole cannellini beans in a hearty broth of garlic, thyme and hints of rosemary. However, our server went a little heavy with the olive oil when he finished the dish tableside, making the broth more greasy than necessary.

A special crostini (\$8) I enjoyed one evening is white cannellini bean and garlic puree topped with black kale, pecorino cheese and truffle oil on house-made bread. It appeared to have replaced the house crostini (\$8) with eggplant and caramelized onions, a combination that didn't come together as well. Menu changes and rotations like this will keep Incontro fresh.

The same attention should be given to the salads. The Caesar dressing (\$7.50) was flat and one-dimensional with scant traces of anchovies, lemon and Parmesan. The house salad (\$7), which temporarily replaced the spinach, contained nothing more than onion slices and tomato wedges beneath a dull vinaigrette.

Despite these minor stumbles, Incontro is a charming dining experience, and apparently word has spread. The restaurant was packed on all of my visits, with a variety of diners, including families, couples and friends talking boisterously over glasses of red wine. I had to endure a nearly 45-minute wait on one particularly busy Friday evening. With five stools at the bar, waiting is difficult, so it's best to make reservations, especially for weekends.

E-mail comments to food@sfchronicle.com.

Incontro

2065 San Ramon Valley Blvd. (at Crow Canyon Road),
San Ramon; (925) 820-6969

Dinner 5:30-9:30 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday, until 10 p.m. Friday and
Saturday,

5-9 p.m. Sunday. Reservations and credit cards accepted. Beer and wine.

Overall: TWO STARS
Food: TWO STARS
Service: THREE STARS
Atmosphere: TWO STARS
Prices: \$\$
Noise Rating: THREE BELLS

Pluses: Owners evoke a neighborly charm that makes you feel like you're dining among friends, not strangers.

Minuses: Bland, boring salads need to be rethought.

RATINGS KEY

FOUR STARS: Extraordinary
THREE STARS: Excellent
TWO STARS: Good
ONE STAR: Fair
(box): Poor

\$ Inexpensive: entrees \$10 and under
\$\$ Moderate: \$11-\$17
\$\$\$ Expensive: \$18-\$24
\$\$\$\$ Very Expensive: more than \$25

Prices based on main courses. When entrees fall between these categories, the prices of appetizers help determine the dollar ratings.

ONE BELL: Pleasantly quiet (under 65 decibels)
TWO BELLS: Can talk easily (65-70)
THREE BELLS: Talking normally gets difficult (70-75)
FOUR BELLS: Can only talk in raised voices (75-80)
BOMB: Too noisy for normal conversation (80+)

Chronicle critics make every attempt to remain anonymous.
All meals are paid for by the Chronicle.
Star ratings are based on a minimum of three visits.
Ratings are updated continually based on a least one revisit.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/chronicle/archive/2006/10/04/FDG6FLGEEN1.DTL>

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