

Times Herald-Record

Amici's: Italian-American cuisine that's done well

By **Bill Guilfoyle** For the Times Herald-Record, Newburgh

October 03, 2008

Most Italian restaurants in the United States simply call themselves Italian, which is fine. But in reality they are not at all similar to the restaurants that specialize in the numerous local cuisines that Italy is so famous for. And most Italian restaurants here also have adjusted their recipes to American tastes. You are not going to find Veal Marsala and Chicken Francaise on any restaurant's menu in Tuscany.

So it makes perfect sense that Amici's at the Poughkeepsie train station labels itself an "Italian American" restaurant. The restaurant is stationed in the historic Vassar Brothers Brewery building on the corner of Main Street near the river. The entryway features an open kitchen with a large pizza oven; this place is also a pizzeria. Downstairs is a large lounge and bar.

We're seated in the large, handsome dining room just beyond the entrance area. The room has high ceilings that feature big metal vents that give the otherwise romantic room a slightly industrial feel. Walls are pale pink, and a large column centers the room. Still-life paintings adorn the walls and the expansive windows are shrouded in patterned curtains. Period chandeliers and wall sconces give the room a sense of history and age. Various styles of Italian music fill the room. The shiny wooden floor, marble and wooden tables and solid chairs make this room one handsome space.

The menu features some expected items, Calamari and Tomato and Mozzarella, but also has some more modern additions, such as Meatball Sliders and Lobster Mac and Cheese. There's also a printed list of dinner specials, always welcome. We're served good country bread, crisp focaccia slathered with tomato sauce and olive oil spotted with dried herbs. To begin, we start with Hot Antipasto (\$14). A large square plate holds an immense amount of food, more entree than appetizer. Fried mozzarella has been reduced to a boring, frozen mass-market item, but here it is treated with respect. Thick sticks of cheese are encased in a supercrunchy panko crust (Japan meets Italy). The result is oozy goodness. Stuffed mushrooms are filled with a light, airy stuffing with bits of more mushroom. Baked clams are filled with chopped clams with the bright bite of pimienta. And centering the plate is an ethereal version of Eggplant Rollatini. The eggplant is thinly sliced and wrapped around a delicate blend of ricotta and herbs — delicious.

I am an avowed octopus addict and can't refuse the evening special of Grilled Octopus and Calamari With a Garbanzo Vinaigrette (\$12). My plate holds small rounds of calamari slightly blackened from the grill. They are barely cooked, tender and delicious with the earthy chick peas. The octopus are gorgeous, tiny, dark-purple babies and are quite tasty, but also quite chewy; they take some work to get through.

We wait quite a while between appetizers and main courses, but it's worth it. The entrees here are uniformly large. We try (who can resist?) Godfather Chicken (\$18). This monster breast, like a small football, is stuffed with mozzarella, prosciutto, salami, roasted peppers and basil. It is then deep-fried, which accounts for the dark brown exterior. Served with a thick, slightly sweet balsamic reduction, it's very nice if a tad dry. Al dente spaghetti with red sauce, quite good, is served alongside with a bit-too-crunchy blend of red and green pepper, carrots and yellow and green zucchini.

Next up is Grilled Salmon With Shrimp Risotto (\$20). A large filet is served alongside a round mold of rice. The salmon is charred from the grill and perfectly medium inside, quite good. The risotto is filled with sweet chunks of shrimp but is on the dry side for risotto. It lacks the creamy consistency that makes this dish so special. The same crunchy vegetables are on my plate also.

Peanut Butter Cake (\$7) is a commercial, over-the-top confection. It combines layers of chocolate cake and peanut butter mousse and is finished with chocolate sauce and whipped cream. It's a bit too sweet but hard not to like.

With dinner, we enjoyed a Sauvignon Blanc by New Harbors (\$24) from Australia. Light-bodied and full of grapefruit flavors, it is delicious with our meal.

Service is a bit understaffed — there are only one waitress and busboy. The chef and owner, Joel Trocino, actually comes out of the kitchen to help serve and bus tables, a real class act.

Amici's succeeds in a lot of ways: It's a pizzeria, a lounge and a restaurant. The space is top-notch, a beautiful old building tastefully redone. The food here is also quite good — Italian-American cuisine well executed. Service was a bit slow but very friendly, and prices are about where they should be. Amici's is definitely worth a visit.

RATING

Decor: HHHH

Service HHH

Food: HHH

Value: HHH

Overall: HHH

Amici's Italian

American Restaurant

Where: 35 Main St., Poughkeepsie

Phone: 452-4700

Web: www.amicis-restaurant.com

Entree price range: \$15.50-29

Hours/days: lunch: 11:30 a.m.-4 p.m. Mon.-Sat.; dinner: 4-10 p.m. Mon.-Thurs.; 4-11 p.m. Fri. and Sat.; noon-9 p.m. Sun.

Children's menu: on request

Parking: nearby public parking

Reservations: suggested on weekends

Full bar

Handicapped-accessible: yes

Low-fat/vegetarian menu: yes

Other amenities: takeout, private parties, catering, live music, cooking lessons

Signature dishes: Fried Gorgonzola Stuffed Olives, Lobster Mac and Cheese, Pork Osso Buco

Credit cards: MasterCard, Visa, American Express

Restaurant critic Bill Guilfoyle has more than 25 years experience in the restaurant industry as a sommelier, manager, and chef/owner. He is an associate professor at a local college. He welcomes readers' comments; e-mail him at thedishthr@hotmail.com.