

NEWPORT BEACH

Independent

“For Locals, by Locals”

TABLE FOR TWO

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Sapori Soars

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“Have you been to Sapori Ristorante?” I asked Chris the other day.

“No, but people keep telling me to go there.”

“Me too. What do you know about it?”

“Beautiful patio, authentic Italian food, fun atmosphere,” recited Chris. “At least that’s what I’ve been told.”

“Shall we go find out?”

“Ciao, bella,” replied Chris with a pseudo-Italian accent.

“Not exactly the correct response, but I’ll cut you some slack. Come on, Fellini, let’s go.”

We drove to Sapori, one of several restaurants in a small strip mall on Bayside Drive. The exterior was deceptive, hiding a lovely Mediterranean bistro patio with twinkling lights, fountains, and cozy fireplace within—the perfect area for al fresco dining.

“Beautiful,” I said, taking in the ambiance.

“Ciao, bella,” Chris laughed.

“Your Italian vocabulary is sorely limited,” I shook my head. “Good thing we’re in Newport, although it feels like the Italian Riviera.”

We strolled inside the restaurant to admire the equally charming interior, but opted to sit outside. After being seated, owner Sal Maniaci came over to say hello.

“Buonasera e benvenuti” said Sal. “Welcome to Sapori. This is your first time here?”

“I’m embarrassed to admit it, but yes,” said Chris sheepishly.

“No need to be embarrassed. Meglio tardi che mai - better late than never,” Sal smiled.

“We’re very excited to be here,” I piped in.

Inviting him to sit down with us, our curiosity took over.

“How long has Sapori been here?” Chris inquired.

“Twenty-one years. It seems like yesterday,” Sal reminisced.

“Longevity has served you well,” I marveled. “How do you keep the clientele returning?”

“We are a family-owned restaurant that prides itself on food, consistency and quality. I use only the freshest, local produce and ingredients, as well as organic, hormone-free meat.”

Perusing Sapori’s menu, I saw a plethora of familiar favorites.

“You have quite a selection of traditional Italian standards to choose from,” I noticed. “What’s your inspiration?”

“My family. They were in the restaurant business,” Sal explained. “It was natural for me to follow. At 14, I went to chef school in Palermo, then studied hotel and restaurant management.”

“How do you distinguish Sapori from other Italian restaurants?” I queried.

“We’re not a mo- and-pop restaurant - actually, more gourmet - yet we’re steeped in family tradition. The staff has been here for 20 years, and some of our clients, too. Our longtime guests’ children now dine here,” Sal grinned.

Our attention shifted to several platters placed on the table.



Appetizer sampler: Bruschetta al Pomodoro and Tapenade (toasted bread with fresh tomatoes, black olive paste, capers, and basil), Prosciutto e Melone (cantaloupe wrapped with parma prosciutto), Calamari Fritti (fried calamari)

“I thought you’d like to try a few things,” Sal offered. “Here we have Bruschetta with Tapenade, Prosciutto and Melon, and Calamari Fritti.”

Chris and I began sampling the various appetizers, which elicited sounds of praise.

“I’m not usually big on fried food, Sal,” I admitted. “But this calamari is scrumptious.”

“The tapenade is, too,” Chris interjected enthusiastically.

“Thank you. It’s homemade. We also make our own semolina pastas,” Sal said, referring to another platter. “These are Saponi’s specialties: Penne Ottero and Lobster Ravioli. We also have the Porcini Risotto.”

I took a bite of the Penne Ottero first, which looked unusually different.

“Sal, this sauce has the most unbelievable flavor,” I commented. “It’s amazingly unique.”

“It’s our signature dish.”

“Nutmeg? Clove?” I questioned. “Yum! I know there’s pancetta and cognac, but...?”



Clockwise from bottom left: risotto with mushrooms, lobster ravioli, Penne in a tomato cream sauce with fresh tarragon, bits of bacon, and vodka.

“Tarragon and hot peppers,” Sal enlightened me, turning his attention on Chris. “You like the Lobster Ravioli, no?”

Caught in the act of savoring his first bite, Chris opened his eyes and nodded enthusiastically.

“It melts in your mouth,” he replied.

“So Sal, you knew at 14 that restaurants were your passion?” I asked disbelievingly.

“Yes,” he stated matter-of-factly. “Although, 15 years ago I achieved another goal and became a pilot.”

“Really? You were going to switch careers?”

“No, no. Even though I’m licensed to fly airlines. When you fly, you don’t think about the business, bills, or nothing,” he continued. “I love being in the soup - flying in clouds - with no land in sight. I feel like I’m in my room with a fireplace, the coziness, flying in clouds, instruments flying. It’s like having six pans on the burner and not letting anything burn.”

“Well, you’re doing a good job of it,” Chris laughed as we simultaneously reached for the risotto.

“You first,” Chris offered.

“No, you,” I declined.

“Please—“

“Don’t argue,” I interrupted, handing him the plate.

Sal and I sat back to study Chris’ reaction

“W-wow,” Chris stuttered, looking at us like a deer in the headlights.

I leaned towards Sal conspiratorially.

“Translated, that means he likes it, but at the moment he’s feeling descriptively challenged,” I confided with a chuckle.

The Filetto ai Funghi was next, a beautiful cut of tender beef complimented by porcinis and cabernet sauce.

After the table was cleared, the piece-de-resistance arrived.



Finally, the Tiramisu.

“Finally, the Tiramisu,” Sal indulged us. “Ladyfingers, soaked in espresso, vanilla and rum, with layers of mascarpone, whipped cream, and chocolate ganache.”

“Heaven,” Chris breathed.

I savored a forkful, then exhaled contentedly, “Like flying in the soup.”

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