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Published Friday, June 18, 2004

Italian for the Whole Family

Il Forno, a New South Lakeland Eatery, Excels at Pizza, Pasta, Sandwiches

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The Ledger

The space in Merchants Walk that used to be a bad Chinese restaurant has been taken over by a good Italian restaurant, the kind you can take the family to -- often.

Il Forno, the name means the oven, opened Feb. 18 after much work by husband and wife team Michele and Nila Pugliese (don't pronounce the g).

The result is a homey feel to the 78-seat restaurant that includes tables and booths inside and a few tables outside. Our roomy booth needed to be crumbed, and a server took care of it quickly.

You can see a variety of pizzas and breads sold by the slice and the piece sitting on the counter ready to pop into a flat oven and reheat.

My wife and I were the only diners at 4:45, so go early for a good seat.

Though there is a self-serve soft drink fountain, our pleasant young server got our drinks and kept the glasses full.

My wife often orders fried cheese as an appetizer because, too often, there is little else that appeals. Il Forno's version at \$4.45 is different from the mundane offering described on the menu -- mozzarella breaded and fried and served with marinara sauce. A small platter topped by romaine is topped by a fried cheese sandwich. The chef starts with French bread cut on the bias, puts thick, stretchy cheese between two slices, fries it and then bakes it. Two delicious sandwiches, cut lengthwise to dip into hot marinara sauce, make an order.

Antipasto appetizer (\$7.95) promised a selection of imported cheeses, meats, olives and roasted red peppers, served on a bed of lettuce. A few rolls of tasty meats, a few pieces of bland mozzarella, a few briny black olives (one with a pit), and a few pieces of smoky roasted red peppers garnished a platter of tomatoes -- chunks, slices and halved grape tomatoes. Even if you like tomatoes this was ridiculous.

Garlic knots of bread go well with the antipasto.



Michele Pugliese, owner of Il Forno Italian restaurant with some specialties, clockwise from bottom center: Antipasto appetizer, Santino's Italian Sub, Chicken Piccata, Il Forno Supreme Pizza and cannoli. ERNST PETERS/The Ledger

Caesar salads come classic (\$3.95) and with chicken (\$5.95). A few bits of chicken in our plain would have offended vegetarians. Fresh parmesan shreds and a gutsy dressing on clean romaine made the salad pleasant.

Walnut Gorgonzola Salad (\$5.95) sounded too good to pass up. Unfortunately, the spring mix looked as if it had been in the kitchen since fall. Sharp cheese, fresh herbs and nuts with a memorable Balsamic vinaigrette could not make up for the bad greens.

Pasta dinners include a side salad and fresh, handmade breadstick.

We shared an order of Fettuccine Alfredo (\$8.95) and each got an appetizer-sized portion of some of the best Alfredo I have had in ages. A cheese shaker is often needed to put life in old Alf, not here. None was offered, and none was needed to make the smooth cheese sauce great. The dish was a couple of cuts above good -- even after it had cooled.

Flour coating didn't get in the way of Chicken Piccata (\$11.95). Capers got in the way and dominated the taste to the detriment of the dish. Fewer capers and more lemon, please, to let the flavor of the two tender, nicely cooked half chicken breasts get through.

Penne Alla Bella Donna (\$9.95) flavored the tomato sauce for pasta with olives (one had a pit), capers and anchovies. I could taste the anchovies but couldn't find them. They had dissolved into the sauce, like good anchovies should.

It would be easy to eat too much of the lasagna and feel uncomfortable. For \$8.75, you get a slim slice, hot with melted cheese and a proper balance of pasta, cheese, sauce and meat.

Lunch with two coworkers turned out to be a better experience than dinner. But don't expect to be in and out in half an hour for lunch.

Half a dozen bread knots (\$2.45) on a paper plate make a nice shared nibble while waiting for something more substantial. The oily, fluffy bread would have been better with sauce.

From the Hot Sandwiches section of the menu, we ordered a Panini al Forno (\$6.45). A well-and-truly toasted roll held piles of sweet red pepper, melted cheese that turned into tasty strings and chicken breast that might have been cooked a little less.

Other hot choices included sausage, peppers and onions; eggplant, chicken and meatball Parmigiana; (that's three choices, not one huge sandwich); Philly cheesesteak; and tuna melt.

From the cold sandwiches section, a guest wanted to try Santino's Italian Sub (\$5.45). Really, we all wanted to try the ham, capicola, salami and provolone with lettuce and tomato. A lot of mayo came on the side and some chips. The pile of meat and cheese, accompanied by enough lettuce and tomato to make a salad, was fine cold but would have been even better hot. That's an option.

After strolling by the pizzas on the counter, it seemed natural to order one and a guest suggested Il Forno Supreme (\$16-inch for \$14.95 and 18-inch for \$15.95) with the works.

I bet if we looked through the toppings really hard, we might have found a miniature kitchen sink. It had everything else. Pick the slices up: Thin crust is difficult to cut and even more so on paper

plates.

Pizza Bianca (ricotta, mozzarella and garlic) cost \$2.50 less than loaded and arrived hot and chewy and nicely browned, just the thing for a cheeseaholic.

Calzones and strombolis cost the same -- \$5.75 with cheeses and \$5.95 with anything else.

My veggie calzone that hung over the platter was supposed to have mushrooms, broccoli and spinach as well as mozzarella. I have yet to find the spinach. I did find a huge hunk of tomato in the small container of tomato sauce for dipping.

Cheesecake made up one-third of the dessert choices. Ho-hum. But the other two thirds made up for the mundane.

My quest for the perfect cannoli (about 13 years now) came to a screeching slowdown with the first taste of Il Forno's version. (\$2.95). Small chocolate chips dotted the smooth filling that might have been made from all sorts of sweet things. If you didn't know it was cheese, you would probably never guess. Get a knife to cut the shell and a spoon to get the last chip.

A square of tiramisu (\$3.75) had two light layers of ladyfingers and it sings of chocolate like a spring robin. The cooks could sell this, smooth and light without obvious coffee and rum flavors, by the panful -- to me.

According to the latest health inspection by the Department of Business and Professional Regulation, on Feb. 3, the only item of critical concern, normal for new places, was having employees certified as food handlers or managers. Pugliese says this has been done.

A few things the restaurant could do to improve are:

- Cover the pizza slices and bread. I know this is the normal way to display them -- naked -- but it bothers me every time I see it.
- Back off on the tomatoes on the antipasto. If the menu doesn't say a platter of tomatoes, you shouldn't serve a platter of tomatoes.
- Sort the greens more closely.
- Cut back on the expensive capers in Chicken Piccata.
- Put the CD player on random. A whole CD of the high-pitched tenor is too much.

The restaurant is a nice addition to southside dining, and well worth a trip from north of I-4 for a family-style meal.

Il Forno earns 3 stars.

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