

RESTAURANTS

PAMELA SILVESTRI / *Dining out***Bocelli: one of borough's best**

Winning menu, fine service and thoughtful touches are worthy of much recognition from the dining public

Bocelli Ristorante in Grasmere simply raises the bar for dining in the borough with its smooth service and attention to detail.

Co-owners and siblings Maria Buonsante and Vincent DeMonte work with executive chef and co-owner Stefano Sena. Together they turned Bocelli into what it is -- an eatery for which Staten Island can be proud.

Expect DeMonte or Ms. Buonsante to greet patrons as they walk in the door. Further inside the restaurant, a curtain of shiny copper cookware gives way to one pulse of the place -- an open kitchen supervised by hands-on Sena.

PASSION IN THE DETAILS

Colorful produce and fresh, chilled shellfish decorate an expediting area, a spot where meals are checked before heading to tables. And an open kitchen is a daring concept! Here it works terrifically with Bocelli's even-tempered, well-trained staff. Glimpsing the inner-workings of a properly managed, bustling kitchen is a detail worth appreciating.

Getting past the kitchen, guests move into a dining area set with linen-lined tables. A staircase winds upward to a second floor party room while a few expansive murals punctuate shiny wood-paneled walls.

Servers donning ties monogrammed with the letter "B" extend fine, unobtrusive service. Mature waiters are dignified and take humble pride in the art of good service.

They can cook pasta table-side in a wheel of Grana Padana cheese. They serve ladies first. Without prompting, they refold crumpled napkins left by guests who excuse themselves from the table.

But enough of the details. Bring on the food!

WINNING ITEMS

A shrimp and calamari appetizer offered with sweet cherry peppers, pine nuts and white raisins (\$12) -- also known as Gamberetti e Calamari in Padella "Agrodolce" -- kicks fried squid tubes and tentacles into the extraordinary for Staten Island.

Seafood is among the winning morsels at Bocelli. The list could continue after this but good picks include the Fish of the Day such as wild striped bass (selections average \$16 at lunch, \$24 at dinner), steamed black mussels with white wine, tomato and basil (Cozze alla "Posillipo" for \$8) and the Antipasto Freddo alla Pescatore (\$14) that may include meaty, Flowers' oysters from Long Island served on the half-shell.

On sampled meat dishes, fresh seasonings such as rosemary, lemon, oregano and garlic produced light sauces easy on the salt that allowed flavors to stand out.

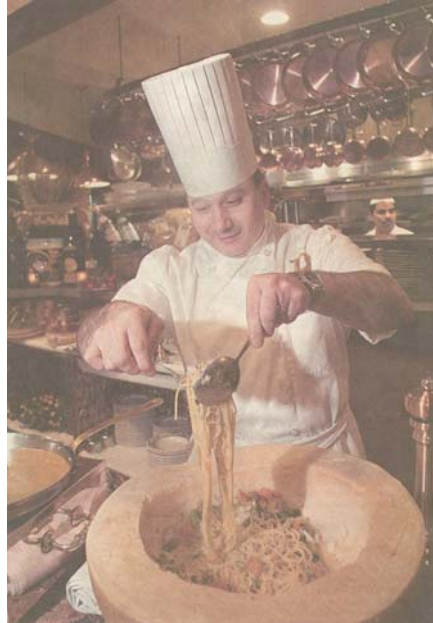
Lunch is ideal for special daytime meetings. Some may consider it a bargain over higher-ticket dinner items.

Insalata del Pastore features a "shepherd's salad" with arugula, radicchio and julienne of endive, Toscanello cheese, turkey breast and superb soppressato and prosciutto (\$14.) Quality ingredients -- right down to basics like oil and vinegar -- make a beautiful appearance with flavorful end results.

Sandwiches and perfectly-cooked burgers under the "Panini" selections are hearty and worth an average ticket price of \$12. House salad may be a better choice than fries, by the way. But again, quality food components and the high level of service make it a value.

STANDING OUT

Thoughtful touches make Bocelli shine. The kitchen ladles accompanying sauces served on the side into miniature copper pans rather than ceramic or stainless steel ramekins. Fresh, netted lemon



Chef Stefano Sena dishes up his signature Spaghetti alla Bocelli at Bocelli Ristorante in Grasmere.



Fresh, chilled langoustine decorate the expediting area where meals are checked before heading to tables.

wedges presented on slightly dampened, cloth napkins allow for a hand-cleaning after plucking at stuffed artichokes or clams and lobsters from their shells.

Bocelli thinks enough of its food and patrons to stick with linen cloths and napkins at lunch and dinner. It uses colorful plates, platters with varied shapes and materials and it shows off an interesting, user-friendly wine list.

In turn, patrons think enough of Bocelli to dress for dinner. Peer pressure from a well-groomed evening crowd should ward off those daring a weekend, fine dining experience in sweats and jeans.

On Friday and Saturday nights, live lounge tunes spills out of the bar area with repertoires of Humpertinck, Sinatra and Tom Jones. The entertainment isn't for everyone. And some may deride décor that includes artificial sunflowers and bud vases with faux roses or alstromeria.

Despite weekend commotion, servers and attentive owners are exemplary for the Island. They stand out with their dedication to food service and their obvious, fine work ethic.

Above all, the kitchen turns out consistently excellent meals.

**Bocelli Ristorante**

150 Hylan Blvd.
Grasmere
(718) 420-6150

Hours

Monday through Thursday,
Noon to 3 p.m., 4-10 p.m.;
Friday and Saturday
Noon to 3 p.m., 4-midnight;
Sunday, Dinner only, 1-9 p.m.
Kitchen and servers take an hour-long
hiatus between lunch and dinner
while the bar stays open.

Prices

Appetizers: \$8 - \$14
(not including shared appetizers)
Salads: \$6 - \$8
Pasta: \$12 - \$21
Risotto: \$22 - \$24
Entrées: \$18 - \$29
Specials: \$24 - \$29

Food
Italian

Liquor

Full bar with wine list that focuses on Italian wines. Bottled beer and wines by the glass are also offered.

Credit Cards

Mastercard, Discover, Visa and American Express

Seating for a la carte

90 seats plus 15 bar seats.
Full menu is available at the bar.
Private party room holds up to 90.

Reservations

Recommended on weekends

Wheelchair access

Yes, with elevator to second floor
Party room

★★★★★ An exceptional find
★★★★★ Heads above the rest
★★★★ Valuable choice
★★★ Worth a visit
★ Has promise