



Culinary Corner

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REVIEW



Bobby Cochran/CW photos

Il Posto's halibut filet entrée, or *rombo al rosmarino e limone*, as it reads on the menu, comprises a halibut filet seared and then finished with white wine and rosemary sauce, all served atop a vegetable spaghetti.

Positively Il Posto

Conte's osteria is *the* place at Phillips Place

by Heidi Billotto
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Restaurateur Augusto Conte has the magic touch. Currently the owner of four Charlotte restaurants, Conte has a fabulous lineup that includes solid hitters Toscana Italian Restaurant, Luce Restaurant and Bar, Coco Osteria and Il Posto Osteria. Open not quite two years, Il Posto – or “the place,” in Italian – is coming into its own.

Il Posto began as a carbon copy of Conte's Coco Osteria. “Same wife, new dress,” Conte remarked just after Il Posto opened. The casual concept at Coco had been such a grand success Uptown that Conte decided to give it a try in SouthPark. With his more upscale Toscana less than a mile away at Specialty Shops on the Park, Phillips Place seemed to be the perfect locale for more of the same fine Italian fare with a scaled-down price structure and slightly less formal atmosphere. Osterias or trattorias, as these casual Italian dining spots are sometimes called, are Tuscany's answer to a neighborhood bistro. The concept is perfect for the chic Phillips Place shopping area.

Il Posto offers patrons a simpler option for dinner without compromising the quality or service for which Conte's ventures are known.

Dining designs

A short but sweet osteria-style menu made Il Posto

a hit from the start. The restaurant's small dining spaces, with seating upstairs, on the main level and, in suitable weather, outside on the patio, are always crowded. As Il Posto's popularity grew, Conte and staff realized that the restaurant's small kitchen often became overwhelmed with orders. They feared the kitchen would begin to sacrifice quality to produce quantity. Steadfast in his efforts to keep Il Posto's quality on par with that of his other restaurants, Conte recently made radical changes, all of them for the better.

During summer months, the restaurant does not use the upstairs dining room, enabling outdoor patrons to be easily reseated on the upper level in case of an unexpected storm. Conte, chef David Lopez and executive chef Gabriele Grigolon revamped the menu to include a wider variety of entrées and nightly specials. A menu that began like Coco's, heavy on pasta and with just a few heartier main courses, is now more in keeping with Toscana's menu, with several chicken, veal, beef and seafood entrées part of the nightly lineup. Prices are slightly higher than they were when the restaurant opened but still fall into the reasonably priced realm of an osteria.

The new formula seems to work well. Il Posto is still crowded, but the wine and food are first rate and the service is top notch.

No need for noise

To me, the Il Posto experience has just two detractors from the fine food and contemporary interiors.

IL POSTO OSTERIA

★★★★ out of 5

Location: 6908-A Phillips Place Court

Phone: 704-643-6070; Fax: 704-892-3084

Price range: Lunch entrées, \$8-\$12; dinner entrées, \$15-\$22.

Hours: Lunch served Monday through Friday, 11 a.m.-2 p.m.; dinner served Sunday through Thursday, 5-10 p.m., and Friday and Saturday, 5-11 p.m.

Details: Casual attire, extensive menu of Italian and American wines and beers, takeout, patio dining, reservations accepted, catering available, no smoking.

One is a large, unsightly air conditioning unit in the corner of the upstairs dining room. The unit sits directly next to one of the dining tables and creates a great deal of noise as it runs through its cycle. In addition, sounds from the bustling open kitchen and the buzz of chatting patrons bounce off the hard surfaces upstairs and down to create a din that diminishes the dining experience.

Not unique to Il Posto, this phenomenon occurs in many restaurants and public places done in concrete, glass and metal. The design of the space could be explained away as urban tone and atmosphere, but I still find it an annoying problem easily remedied with softer surfaces like fabrics and carpeting. Weather permitting, I recommend sitting outside on the patio.



One of the frequently featured pasta specials at Il Posto, the *ravioli alla Piemontese* is a must-try combination of roasted-veal ravioli napped with a butter, sage and veal sauce.

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Each dish at Il Posto is prepared to order with a lineup of fresh ingredients.

On the savory side

At lunch enjoy hearty salads such as the *insalata alla tagliata di manzo*, a fresh arugula salad with grilled flank steak, shaved Parmesan and balsamic dressing; *insalata di pollo*, a grilled chicken breast with baby spinach salad, roasted peppers, walnuts, gorgonzola dolce and balsamic dressing; and *insalata al finocchietto e salmone*, mixed organic greens, cherry

tomatoes, grilled salmon and a fresh dill vinaigrette. Rounding out the selections are the simpler *insalata caprese*, with its fresh imported buffalo mozzarella and locally grown tomatoes, and a smaller house salad of organic greens dressed in a lighter balsamic vinaigrette. The lunch menu also features a variety of grilled Italian sandwiches (panini) and pasta dishes.

Don't miss the homemade *ravioli alla fiorentina*, stuffed with buffalo ricotta, spinach and nutmeg, served lightly napped with melted butter, sage and Parmesan; or the *gnocchi di patate alla pomarola*, small, handmade potato dumplings served in fresh tomato sauce with Parmesan cheese and buffalo mozzarella. The chicken, beef or fish dishes make a heartier plate, whereas a generous appetizer of Italian cheeses or thin-sliced, cured Italian meats paired with a basket of warm bread can constitute a lighter meal.

The dinner menu carries the same cheese and meat starters and many of the same pasta dishes, as well as a selection of soups and salads. The menu begins to depart from familiar lunch fare with its *risotto del giorno* that changes daily, as the name suggests.

Heartier dinner entrées you'll want to try include a grilled-to-order ribeye served

(more on page 28)

Culinary Corner

Il Posto

(continued from page 27)



Chef David Lopez (left) and executive chef Gabriele Grigolon command the open kitchen at Il Posto.

with baby arugula, olive oil and balsamic vinegar; *saltimbocca alla Sorrentina*, a rich baked veal scaloppini topped with imported *prosciutto crudo* and mozzarella finished with a fresh tomato sauce and pecorino cheese; and *rombo al rosmarina e limone*, a fork-tender halibut filet sautéed with lemon, white wine and rosemary.

Side dishes include baby spinach sautéed in olive oil, oven-roasted potatoes with pecorino cheese, and tender spring asparagus baked in butter and Parmesan.

Sweet ending

The dessert menu changes nightly. If they're available, try the delightful ricotta

cheesecake, the rich chocolate mousse or the creamy panna cotta. By far the most impressive offering when it is available is the homemade gelato, made each day from scratch by Il Posto's general manager, Sante Proietti.

When Il Posto opened, Proietti came to Charlotte to work with Conte, his good friend of 20 years. Although Proietti modestly describes himself as the guy who makes the ice cream and watches the door, he keeps things at Il Posto running smoothly – sometimes a daunting task when Phillips Place is hopping and the crowds converge. □



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What's cookin'

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Second Harvest Food Bank of Metrolina

recently received a check for \$4,554 from the Pampered Chef – the first of two checks the food bank will receive this year from the company. The funds represent donations from customers and independent consultants through The Pampered Chef's year-long Round-Up from the Heart charitable giving campaign. In its 15 years, the campaign has generated more than \$10 million for America's Second Harvest.

This week, Second Harvest Food Bank of Metrolina will partner with New Creation Christian Stores to fight hunger. From Aug. 5 to 12, New Creation will host a "Kids Helping Kids in Our Community" outreach project. The Matthews and Concord stores will accept donations of canned vegetables and nonperishable food items for Second Harvest. Kids' Day, which takes place Saturday, Aug. 12, includes appearances by VeggieTales' Bob and Larry, first at the Matthews store (2021 Matthews Township Parkway) from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. and then at the Concord store (8635 Concord Mills Blvd.) from 2 to 4 p.m.



Mark your calendars for the 18th annual Great Gatsby party

to benefit the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, Mid-Atlantic Chapter on Aug. 26 from 8 p.m. to midnight. The evening's Roaring '20s-themed gala, open to the public ages 21 and older, will take place at the Atrium at Two Wachovia Center. Partygoers can don feather boas, flapper dresses and well-shined shoes for this fund-raiser, which includes food from Charlotte restaurants and music

from the band A Sign of the Times. The party, expected to draw more than 850 guests, will offer a costume contest, a dance competition and exhibition by Arthur Murray Dance Studios, and a silent auction. Karat Patch Jewelers will offer champagne glasses for purchase, each holding a "sparkling bauble" – one glass will contain an authentic diamond and the others will hold a half-carat cubic zirconium. Participating restaurants include City Tavern, The Philosopher's Stone, Ri Ra Irish Pub, Maggiano's Little Italy, Jersey Mike's Subs, Pearl, Dilworth Coffeehouse, Cajun Queen, Sugar Buzz Pastry, Fuel Pizza Café, Pepsi, Moe's Southwest Grill and Krispy Kreme. Tickets are \$35 in advance or \$40 at the door. For details or to purchase tickets, call 704-525-2955 or 800-477-2955, or visit www.nationalmssociety.org/ncp.



The Pewter Rose

, located upstairs at 1820 South Blvd., is offering several summertime specials. Half-price appetizers are offered weekdays from 4 to 7 p.m. for patrons dining on the patio or in the bar. All entrées are half price between 4 and 6 p.m. daily except Sunday. Tuesdays feature a special list of half-priced wines. On Saturday and Sunday, take part in Pewter's famous brunch, served from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Mimosas are \$2.50 every Sunday; the bar also offers more than a dozen specialty champagne drinks available only during brunch. For reservations or more information, call 704-332-8149.



Providence Café on Perrin Place

in Eastover will host a wine tasting Tuesday, Aug. 8, from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. in the Artichoke Room. Light hors d'oeuvres and a half-dozen wines will be served. Cost is \$10 per person. For reservations or more information, call 704-376-2008. □