



Eggplant "Carrozzella"

BY PAMELA SILVESTRI

FLIP FOR FILIPPO

Who needs a menu? Chef Lia whips up Italian delicacies with a truly personal touch

Cardoons and squash flowers are being served right now in a Staten Island restaurant. Yes, the notion raises an eyebrow especially since its barely March and these would be considered seasonal items. But executive chef/co-owner **Filippo Lia** makes those little delicacies in Dongan Hills, in the Filippo's Ristorante kitchen.

Chef Filippo also delights with a dish of white Sicilian eggplant, a specialty that has become the restaurant's signature item. Gently fried eggplant slices cup a mixture of seasoned caciocavallo, a nutty-tasting, curd-born cheese that mingles perfectly with the honey that is drizzled atop.

Oh, yes, those cardoons and squash flowers—offered as separate appetizers—are egged, floured and fried with fresh mozzarella and prosciutto then served around a fine julienne of vinaigrette-kissed greens. Cardoons, by the way, are messy, tedious things to prepare. After all the fuss, the artichoke-related vegetable looks like a tender stalk of celery. And it's delicious.

Soups are an excellent way to measure a chef's aptitude. Filippo's "minestre" are quite good.

Pasta e Fagioli, for instance, floats sauteed escarole, white beans and smoky bacon bits in tomato-touched chicken broth.

Salads are assembled with care. **Insalata Bianca** pulled together crisp endive, fennel shaves, button mushrooms and walnuts. Ingredients were tossed with lemony dressing and topped with thin strips of ricotta salata.

Filippo's staff is very accommodating. You want to split that Filippo-made fettuccine with your friend? No problem, the waiter will say. You want the **Scaloppine Frizzante**—a listed menu item described as thin-sliced veal with mushroom-champagne sauce—delivered pizaiola-style instead? Sure thing, signore.

The litmus test of how far the kitchen will extend itself was gauged with a request that would have prompted a "no" from a busy chef or eye-rolling from a server in another restaurant: Stuffed filet mignon served rare, not something on the menu. For purists, I realize it's a wicked way to ask for a good piece of meat not to mention a small feat to cook it at this temperature. However the kitchen made it happen with parsley-flecked, egg-battered, fried medallions of super tender beef coddled in fresh mozzarella and prosciutto. It was offered with veal sauce sporting a bounty of Shitake and button mushroom slivers. Yes, it was presented rare.

Hand-made gnocchi—fluffy pillows seemingly crafted with love—were ideal with string beans and a brightly flavored, very fresh pesto sauce. In addition to shrimp and salmon, items like Dover sole, red snapper and whole Branzino bass are part of the seafood repertoire. Speck—cured super-flavored ham that can be likened to a leaner prosciutto—popped into the picture on specials, a very nice touch.

Some desserts are made in house but (sigh) served with squirts of canned whipped cream. Chilled lemon pie—likely better tasting at room temperature—was enjoyable. Italian cheesecake was excellent.

Filippo's dining room gets rather loud. One Saturday—on Valentine's weekend actually—the kitchen and wait staff managed the rollicking crowd well. But on that night, the 55-minute wait past the time of our reservation could have been handled with more suavety (i.e. we should have been advised of an estimated seating time, it would have been nice to have our beverages carried to the table through the crowd and to have someone check occasionally on guests jammed into the nether-regions of the bar, etc.). Foil-wrapped butter pats (sigh again) partnered with a dish of seasoned olive oil and bread basket filled with flatbreads, sesame sticks and warmed, crusty sliced bread. The wine list touches on some nice vinos with the least expensive bottles averaging at \$48.

Waiters schpeel a litany of specials and offer food prices upon request. Actually the bulk of Filippo's offerings is shared in this verbal discussion with the customer. The approach is calculated and appropriate for Filippo's intimate mode. General Manager **Vincent Lia**—co-owner with his brother **Filippo Jr**—will explain, "Because my father's right—people like to listen. Regulars don't even look at the menu."

FILIPPO'S RISTORANTE

★ ★ ★

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Hours

Tuesday though Thursday:
Noon – 10 p.m. Friday: Noon – 11 p.m.
Saturday: 2:00 p.m. – 11:00 p.m.
Sunday: 2:00 p.m. – 8:30 p.m.

Prices

Soups: \$7.95
Appetizers: \$8.95-13.95
Pasta: \$14.95-23.95
Entrees: \$16.95-32.95

Food

Italian

Liquor

Full Bar plus wine list and bottled beer

Credit Cards

All Major Credit Cards Accepted

Seating

65

Reservations

Yes

Wheelchair Accessible

Yes



The intimate dining room at Filippo's