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Fiore di Luna shines with style, selection

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Who says strip malls are only for fast food?

Tucked into a corner of Seneca Square, a modest mall at the intersection of Route 7 and Georgetown Pike in Great Falls, is a northern Italian restaurant that can compete with the best in downtown Washington (and with prices to match the cooking).

Fiore di Luna, which translates as moon blossom, is as pretty as its name. The main room is divided into two dining areas by a free-standing wall of bottles of wine; there's a cozy bar with tables for smokers and a garden for outdoor dining.

The service is particularly attentive, and you won't be rushed, even on a rainy night stretching beyond the 9:30 p.m. closing time.

In its previous incarnation, Fiore di Luna was Le Relais, where chef Yannick Cam prepared fine French dishes before he opened Le Paradou in Washington.

While the premises remain more or less unchanged, the kitchen, now in the talented hands of Italian chef Andrea Pace, is very different. A native of Merano in the Tyrolean section of the Italian Alps, the chef has cooked in Italy and in New York, and at Cafe Milano in Georgetown. His dishes show a mastery of style and delicacy and selection not usually found on Italian menus.

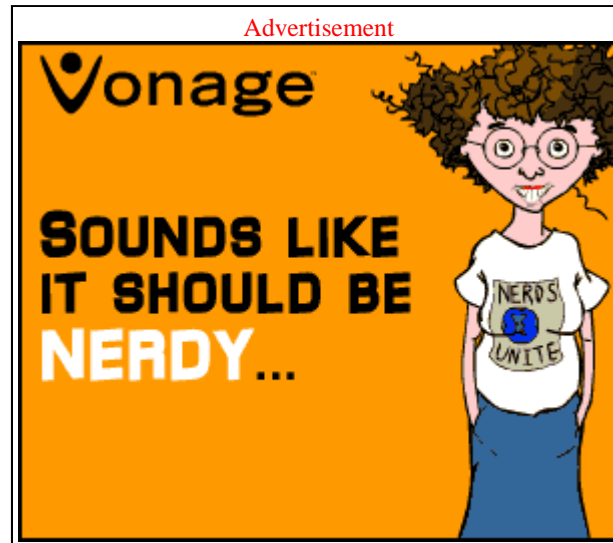
A recent dinner began with fresh bread and good, fruity olive oil for dipping. Then came a gift from the kitchen: a single perfectly cooked large shrimp in a crisp, crunchy polenta batter, resting on a dollop of smooth and subtle eggplant puree. A strip of roasted red pepper with a tiny basil leaf added a touch of color and a complexity of taste. Who knew a shrimp could aspire to such lofty ambition?

Pastas are terrific. Gnocchi robiolino, small oval-shaped morsels made with Yukon Gold potatoes, all but melt in the mouth. The rich cheese sauce demands the diner mop up the last bit with a crust of the bread. The dish is sprinkled with asparagus tips and the whole is topped with an asparagus foam -- both pretty and delicious.

Ravioli, filled with silky ricotta laced with chives and served with a main course of veal tenderloin, are superb. The veal is tender and cooked medium rare, and the dish, like the gnocchi, is accompanied by asparagus -- in this case, the whole spear, not just the tips.

Ravioli as a separate dish are stuffed with duck and foie gras and served in a truffle and sage sauce. Agnolotti are filled with lobster and mascarpone cheese in a carrot and ginger sauce. Lobster graces penne with a balsamic vinegar topping.

All the pastas, as well as the risotto with wild mushrooms, can be ordered in half portions.



Appetizers are more traditional, although Mr. Pace lends an original touch to some of them. To the thin slices of beef tenderloin in his carpaccio, he adds goose liver flavored with port wine and cognac. Salmon carpaccio is smoked with cilantro vinaigrette and creme fraiche. Pan-seared prawns come with a vegetable caponata. Poached sea scallops are served with diced cantaloupe and fennel, but the kitchen was out of scallops (the only disappointment of the evening).

The house-dried bresaola is an excellent starter: paper-thin slices of air-dried beef, a specialty of the Swiss, Austrian and Italian mountains. The beef is served with a sprinkling of lemon and olive oil and a mound of marinated mushrooms with Parmesan shavings. Although the mushrooms tend to be drowned in their marinade, the dish is a delightful alternative to carpaccio.

The list of appetizers includes prosciutto with buffalo mozzarella, soup and several salads, including a lovely fresh salad of arugula in an excellent balsamic vinaigrette, topped with shavings of Parmesan cheese.

Two fish specials are offered each day, depending on the market, such as grilled tuna with peas and a guacamole salsa, or sauteed rockfish served with eggplant caviar in puff pastry.

The meat choices further include braised veal cheeks and roasted sweetbreads; saddle of rabbit stuffed with black olives; duck breast served with polenta; beef tenderloin in a Barolo sauce; and braised lamb shanks.

Mr. Pace's Tyrolean background comes out in the apple strudel. Vanilla-scented chopped apples with golden raisins and pine nuts are wrapped in a crisp phyllo dough and served warm with vanilla and cinnamon ice cream. The strudel is cut on the bias, like an egg roll; it looks elegant, with an appropriately delectable taste to mark a fine ending to the meal.

The luncheon menu is a limited version of the dinner menu with changes. The black olive gnocchi are accompanied at lunch by braised artichokes; spaghetti comes with a tomato confit and mozzarella; and capellini (angel hair pasta) are served with a fresh tomato and basil sauce. Appetizers include crispy baby squid with a spicy tomato dip. A chicken breast with arugula salad is offered as a main course.

The extensive excellent wine list is the creation of William Murck, the enthusiastic young sommelier. Mr. Murck loves his wines and is familiar with a broad range of international vineyards. His list includes numerous wines by the glass and half bottles. About once a month, he arranges a wine tasting with appetizers for \$25 to try new wines. Take his advice; you won't regret it.

RESTAURANT: Fiore di Luna, Seneca Square, 1025-I Seneca Road, Great Falls, Va.; 703/444-4060

HOURS: Lunch 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Tuesday to Friday; dinner 5:30 to 9:30 p.m. Tuesday to Sunday

PRICES: Starters \$6 to \$8 (lunch), \$8 to \$14 (dinner); pastas \$10 to \$18 (lunch), \$18 to \$26 (dinner); main courses \$16 to \$21 (lunch), \$28 to \$32 (dinner); desserts \$8 to \$10

CREDIT CARDS: All major cards

PARKING: Ample free parking

ACCESS: Wheelchair accessible

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