

Tuscan-inspired food as glitzy as the surroundings has made Fiorino a long-running player among New Jersey's Italian restaurants.

It's still going strong after nearly 13 years, as the skills of chef Carlos Espinoza have gotten even better during that time.

He was an associate of owner John Bitici in the days when the latter owned New York City's Minetta Tavern. In Fiorino, Bitici and his son, Mentor, have put together a perennially popular place at a location that once was only a temporary stop for restaurants, which came and went with unsettling regularity.

Yellow awnings mark the spot, just a short walk from the Summit train station, where hospitality and top-notch cuisine now combine for continued success. The dining area is separated by a partition from the bar and its low-profile TVs, presenting a slight air of formality that is appropriate for the quality of the food.

There's so much to choose from that it likely will have you in a quandary about what to order as your meal gets under way. Should it be the grilled eggplant (\$9.50), sweet enough to swing with tomatoes, roasted peppers and basil pesto? Or why not go for the marinated grilled octopus (\$10.25), something you don't find everywhere. This one comes with a warm potato and olive salad. Perfectly grilled prawns (\$13) in an herb pesto vie for your favor with steamed mussels (\$9.50), enhanced by scallions, cherry tomatoes and pungent fresh oregano.

Pastas include several old favorites. Among them are linguine enhanced by baby clams (\$19) in a garlic and white wine sauce, and spaghetti (\$17) with fresh plum tomatoes. But the real interest lies with the "soft" pastas, such as ravioli and pappardelle. They are made on the premises and promise the unusual, as with the pappardelle (\$18) in a rabbit ragu with shiitake mushrooms. For something simpler, there's always the Gorgonzola-filled agnolotti (\$18) with shallots. A sweet pea ravioli special (\$18) was delightful, with prosciutto and cream raising it to delicacy level.

The ravioli is an example of how special the specials really are. When we visited the restaurant, other options in this category ranged from soft-shelled crabs in lemon and white wine (\$32), just crunchy enough and elegant in their simplicity, as well as sweetbreads Francese (\$24), to more complex items, such as calves' liver (\$23) with caramelized onions and pancetta in a balsamic reduction.

The regular menu offers a falling-off-the bone slow-roasted lamb shank (\$25) and a grilled pork chop with Marsala/mustard glaze (\$25). The most expensive item is a veal chop (\$36) with herbed butter, porcini mushroom orzo and roasted French beans.

The wine list is commendable and affordable. Wines from Italy, Australia and Chile sold by the quartino (about a glass and a half) are in the \$8 to \$15 range, but there is a "\$23 list" of Italian and American wines by the bottle on which you're sure to find decent choices. Aside from that, the regular wine list also offers even more reasonable options, whether you're looking for something at less than \$30, a bottle in the \$50 range or a fancier selection for a special occasion, say a Super Tuscan that runs more than \$200 or \$300. The wines hail from all over the map, South America, France and down under, as well as the dominant Italian possibilities. If wine is really your thing, the restaurant offers a wine room for private parties.

Desserts present another opportunity to show this restaurant's class, courtesy of pastry chef Gilbert Antero, formerly of the Hotel Gansevoort in New York City.

There are many possibilities, but my favorite is the dynamite Chocolate Bombe (\$9). A dome of dark chocolate and hazelnut mousse has a silky center of mocha cream. Luxuriously rich, it easily could be shared or eaten in more than one sitting.

The Saccetto di Frutta (\$9) may be hard to pronounce, but it goes down easily. It's a neat little package of fruit and cream, done up in an orange crepe. Passion fruit sorbet and white peach coulis add to its considerable glamor.

Apple Walnut Cobbler (\$9) is a well-produced classic, with walnuts and sauteed apple pieces that have a thread of cinnamon playing against flakes of cream cheese dough and vanilla ice cream.

While our meal generally flowed smoothly, there were glitches along the way. They started when there was no record of our reservation. Luckily, an empty table was located for us, but I wouldn't have been happy if a wait were involved. This can be a very serious error on a busy night, though it ended well enough for us.

Then, halfway through our well-prepared meal, a staffer asked if we wanted cheese on our pasta. We responded in the affirmative and waited, as the pasta cooled, for the cheese to appear. When we finally concluded it wasn't coming, the only thing left to do was surrender and consume the lukewarm dish.

Our waiter had a bit of a language problem. He could take our order, but answering questions was out of his league. Managers did come by to check on how things were going, and we found that any answers we needed about the food had to come from them.

Those complaints should not be construed as dimming our enjoyment of the meal, however. The atmosphere, complemented by strolling guitarists, was just glitzy enough to put a glow on the evening without being pretentious. Fiorino is the kind of place that deserves more than one visit. The food is outstanding, from start to finish, and the ambiance is not far behind.

Fiorino. 38 Maple St., Summit. fiorinoristorante.com.

Reservations recommended: (908) 277-1900

Lunch: 11:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Mondays-Fridays. Dinner: 5-10 p.m. Mondays-Thursday, 5-11 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays.
Closed Sundays. Full bar. Major credit cards. Smart casual dress. Wheelchair accessible.