

Little Italys

Close to home, two *magnifico* restaurants BY LANCE SPARKS

This is a dining-out tale that starts in beauty and ends beautifully with eye-popping, lip-smackin' surprises in between. It's a tale of discovery, headline news, GREAT Italian food in Florence!

Florence, *Oregon*, sillies. OK, doubt me, but take the quest: Rolling toward a Pacific sunset on Hwy. 126, just past the concrete corridors of paved paradise, the beauty begins in the greening valleys of the Cascade foothills, following the Siuslaw from a trickle fed by dripping walls of fern-draped basalt to a mirror-pond at Mapleton. Couple dips and turns, roll into Florence, south on Hwy. 101, couple blocks, quick right across from the Safeway on 7th, one block, stop as the setting sun paints pastels on looming clouds.

Pomodori (Italian for tomato) **Ristoranti** is a small house, pale green, darker green trim, red front door, has that trattoria feel of neighborhood, food among friends. Interior is painted in warm orange, tables draped in colorful stripes with seating for maybe forty, lively art on the walls, row of windows facing west. There's a tiny bar, four stools and two tables but a full-service array of drinks. The feel is clean, warm, welcoming.

After 10-plus years as owners/operators of the successful Cadillac Café in Medford, owners Jeff Lindow and John Bartow "were ready for a change and wanted to be on the coast," so bought and remodeled Pomodori, which opened in December 2005. Since then, the little place has become a local dining icon. The key is the food: "We just love Italian food," says Lindow.

The love manifests in the menu, four pages with a full page of specials. Bartow and Lindow lean toward Northern style — sirloin Florentine, Tuscan halibut, chicken pomodori (a local favorite) — but customer requests have led them to add a wide

range of pastas of Southern and Sicilian origins — Italian sausage penne, Italian meatballs, vodka sauce tortellini. John Bartow is the chef with help from a second, Joe Banuelos. Every dish we tasted, every dish we saw, came to the table bearing marks of artistry in presentation (simple but savory), rich in colors and aromas.

But flavors took top honors. Ravioli are one of our tests: Pomodori's ravioli San Remo are traditional in ingredients — spinach and ricotta cheese stuffing, sauce of sundried tomatoes, prosciutto, basil and parm — but the handmade pastas were tender, the sauce bursting with flavor. Linguini with wild shrimp surprised — the "wild" came from dashes of shredded pepperoncini, leapt in the mouth. Had to try New York tagliata, a 14-ounce steak of top quality, served with fried garlic, capers, olive oil and balsamico — superb. Note: Dinners come with choice of soup or salad (house or Caesar), all excellent. Bread comes hot out of the oven.

Jeff Lindow runs the floor, backed by the able Bonnie. Service is top-shelf, including table-side flambé of apple crisp for dessert.

The wine list is ample, though (oddly) light on Italian wines, but prices are very good, especially on wines by the glass.

Dinner for two, including drinks and wine, came to \$66 before tip. In our math, that adds up to an outstanding dining experience, one to rival the best anywhere — just beautiful.

Pomodori Ristoranti, 1415 7th Street, Florence, (541) 902-2525. Lunch 11 am-2 pm Tu-F; dinner begins at 5 pm Tu-Sa. Reservations recommended, wheelchair access, some off-street parking.

Let's be honest: If we held an Ugly City contest between Eugene and Springfield — assuming we could find honest, impartial judges — then matched the burgs ugly for ugly, Eugene

Fred Coco, owner/chef of Metro



would win easily. Maybe someday in the distant past, Springfield might have had a chance — its downtown dead, its industrial center belching — but Eugene has spent the last 20 years on an intense uglification program only rivaled by parts of China. Over the same period, Springfield has been prettifying on a grand scale. About the only category of charmlessness where Springfield might have an edge has been food. When it came to dining, Springfielders didn't. That, too, could be changing. The little Italian restaurant called **Metro** might be a start.

Imagine driving over the bridge for Italian cuisine. Almost unthinkable. But Metro owner/chef Fred Coco can make the trip worth taking. Coco moved to this area with a view to retiring after operating Italian restaurants in the Midwest, notably one called Metropolitan in another Springfield — this one in Missouri. Imminent changes in family personnel (grandchildren) led Chef Coco to open Metro about eight months ago.

Coco started with a building at 720 South A Street that amounted to a shoebox with windows, an ex-Bob's Burgers converted to a Quizno's converted to closed. Some paint, some art, tables overlooking the train yard and Lithia

Toyota, menu with a Sicilian bent, dedication to making everything in-house — ravioli, sausages, marinara sauces, even the bread — open the doors.

A large portion of Metro's charm emanates from Fred Coco himself. Medium height, slight build, sparse gray goatee, smiling eyes and boundless enthusiasm, he waits tables, takes orders, busses tables and cooks. And make no mistake, Coco can cook. His flash-fried calamari are crispy, the marinara lively. He keeps ready about 15 varieties of ravioli — tell him what you like, and he's got it. The meatballs in the spaghetti have flavor. Chicken parmesan is a local fave. Coco's homemade Italian sausage was a hit — coarse grind, meaty, lotsa flavor. For dessert, shop through the St. Louis-style frozen custards, mighty fun, especially for kids. Prices are moderate.

OK, Coco's wine list needs help, but he emphasizes the cold Italian beers and other beverages.

Metro deserves to thrive along with its rapidly changing neighborhood and its proud town. Cross the bridge, see for yourselves, bring back some pretty.

Fundamentals: Metro, 720 South A Street, Springfield, 726-0283. Dinner starts at 5 pm Tu-Sa. Ample off-street parking, wheelchair access.

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