

Ristorante Marino

Known for their interest in health and fitness, the Marino family has literally put their money where their mouth is in Ristorante Marino, an authentic Italian restaurant at 2465 Massachusetts Avenue in North Cambridge (617-868-5454). In operation since 1990, Marino's reflects the personal philosophy of its founder, Lelio Marino, that well prepared food can taste good *and* be good for you. Consistent with the Marino family's mission to promote health – they also own and operate The Marino Center for Progressive Health across the street – images of fresh, wholesome food abound from the minute you walk in. To the left of the entrance is Marino's Market, where they display their homemade breads, desserts and take-out entrees. Straight ahead is a glassed-in view of the kitchen, in front of which sits a countertop covered with platters of bruchetta, grilled vegetables, fresh cheeses and specials of the day. The culinary staff, headed by Dante, an experienced seafood chef recruited straight from Italy, prepares authentic dishes originating from Italy's Abruzzo region, a province in central Italy where the diet is considered one of the most healthful in the world. Marino's also employs chefs from Spain, El Salvador and South America, who add a multiethnic twist to the cuisine.

Modeled on the healthful Mediterranean diet, the Marino's menu openly addresses their concern for the "health and patronage" of their customers. They use olive oil instead of butter, lower fat cooking techniques, and lots of freshly picked, organically grown vegetables and herbs (grown especially for the restaurant at Marino Lookout Farm in Natick, another family run business). There's not a cream sauce to be found on the menu. All the meats served are hormone- and chemical-free, and deliciously prepared

using a rotisserie or wood-fired grill to retain moisture and flavor. The pastas, breads, sausages and desserts are all homemade. The Marino's whole health philosophy even applies to the house wines, which are made in Italy from only organically grown grapes.

On entering the dining room, you are immediately struck by the ambiance, fueled by dim lighting, ceiling fans, and natural wood grape arbors entwined with greenery. The staff is formal and gracious and eager to please. To go with the season, the dining area on our visit was beautifully decorated with fall flowering plants, and the place settings were uniquely accented with a handpicked apple on the bread plate. The tables themselves are comfortable and far enough apart to allow for privacy, but the high ceilings seem to encourage noise, making it somewhat difficult to hear the waitstaff.

As we looked over the menu, the emphasis on fresh food was evident. True to the Mediterranean diet, tomatoes and olive oil are everywhere. From appetizers to entrees, the chefs seem to go that extra mile to make even traditional fare more healthful. The hot pepper and mushroom focacia bread, for example, is made with whole wheat flour. Served with exceptionally flavorful extra virgin olive oil seasoned with garlic and herbs, it is a delectable twist on an Italian restaurant standard. They also offer a free appetizer buffet, which on the night we visited included thin-crust pizza and marinated olives. In addition to their house wines, the Marinos offer a comprehensive, yet not overwhelming, selection of imported and domestic wines.

Appetizers at Marino's are light, colorful, and classic Italian. From grilled marinated vegetables to sautéed jumbo shrimp in red pepper sauce, there is none of the deep fried mozzarella or calamari typical of many Italian American restaurants (although they do offer a grilled calamari marinated in olive oil, lemon and garlic). We opted for the

Mozzarella Fior Di Latte Alla Caprese, a beautiful arrangement of perfectly ripe sliced tomatoes topped with one whole basil leaf, fresh mozzarella, capers and olive oil. Served alongside the tomatoes were marinated peppers, mushrooms, broccoli, cauliflower and olives, the salted, vinegary flavor of which complemented the mild mozzarella nicely.

The salad selection is simple – mixed greens, Caesar and mesclun greens with antipasto. My dining companion and I split the Caesar, the portion ample enough to share and still leave room for the main course. The dressing had just the right balance of garlic, lemon and oil, giving it a lighter mouthfeel than many Caesar dressings.

As is frequently the case with Caesar salads, there was a little too much dressing, although the Romaine was still crisp, not soggy. Although we didn't order the antipasto, inspection of one delivered to a nearby table revealed a colorful display of grilled vegetables, fresh meats and cheeses drizzled with olive oil and vinegar.

Marino's main dishes offer something for every taste. There's plenty of pasta -- including several kinds of homemade ravioli -- lots of chicken and seafood, 12 unique combinations of pizza, and a few lean meat dishes of veal, lamb and beef. Entrée's range in price from \$15 to \$25. I ordered the Pollo Al Marsala Con Ravioli (Chicken Marsala), a sizeable order of two whole chicken breasts served with mushroom-filled ravioli. If you love mushrooms, this dish is for you! The chicken breasts were succulent, and the sauce was beautifully reduced – rich in flavor, not too sweet – and loaded with fresh mushrooms. The deliciously dense ravioli tasted like stuffed mushrooms packed into homemade pasta, and were wonderfully augmented by the Marsala wine sauce. My partner opted for the Cotoletta Di Vitello Alla Parmigiana, or veal parmigiana. Unlike the usual heavy, high-fat version of this dish found in most Italian restaurants, the veal

was very lightly breaded and browned in olive oil, and thinly covered with fresh mozzarella cheese. The tomato sauce, however, was “unspectacular,” to quote my dinner date, lacking any interesting flavors, but the veal itself was tender and tasty. Although you might expect homemade pasta to be somewhat denser than dried, the spaghetti was a bit too chewy and undercooked.

The desserts at Marino’s include typical Italian favorites like tiramisu and gelato. We split an extremely dense piece of ricotta pie, which was delicious, but drizzled with a somewhat nondescript caramel sauce.

Overall, we found Ristorante Marino offered an enjoyable, although somewhat expensive, night out. The environment is very relaxing and comfortable, and the overall quality of food is top notch. In general, the service was good, but did slow down somewhat toward the end of the night as business picked up. Also, don’t fool yourself into thinking this healthful food is necessarily low in calories. Olive oil, which is utilized in abundance, may be heart healthy, but it’s still high in calories. But for a special occasion where an interesting dining experience is in order, Ristorante Marino may be your place.