

Enza's a real crowd-pleaser

Dining at Italian restaurant is satisfying from start to finish.

By ERICA BURKS, Special to Times-Union

What is it about this little dead-end of a strip mall? One day it has your run-of-the-mill grocery store, a pizza joint, a bar and an Asian restaurant. Fast forward one year, and you' have stellar pizza at Picasso's, a Whole Foods (cue heavenly music) being built as a centerpiece and a nicely revamped Italian restaurant - Enza's - on the other side. On all fronts, it looks like the Mandarin Landing Shopping Center is ticking up.

A group of eight of us went to Enza's on a recent Wednesday and, reservation in hand, got the last table in the bar area. It was disappointing to be on this side of the wall because the other side is far cozier, with ample booths, better seating and a true restaurant feel. The bar feels a bit too impersonal, and our table was a terrible squeeze at the table itself



JOHN PEMBERTON/The Times-Union

Michael and Enza Huff, owners of Enza's Italian Restaurant in the Mandarin Landing Shopping Center, display a seafood dish containing scallops, shrimp and mussels.

Enza's Italian Restaurant
10601 San Jose Blvd. (904) 268-4458

Type of cuisine: Italian.

Hours of operation:

Closed on Monday

4 to 9:30 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday

4 to 10 p.m. Friday

5 to 10 p.m. Saturday

5 to 9:30 p.m. Sunday

Credit cards: All major.

Bar service: Full.

Children's menu? By request.

Reservations accepted? Yes.

Price: Moderate.

and with the table behind us. There was a lot of "Excuse me" and "Sorry about that" all night long. Our server offered to let us wait for another table, but based on the crowd, we opted to sit when we could.

We had three generations with us (three grandmothers, a mom, three grandkids and a friend) with all types of appetites at the table, so I would say we ate more than our fair share. Overall, it was a thumbs-up experience, with one son liking it so much he wants to forsake our regular Italian spot for Enza's. That's loyalty for you.

The platter of calamari was my favorite starter, with crispy tentacles and a peppery red dipping sauce. However, the Shrimp with Garlic and Oil was a close second. The shrimp were enormous and each one was bathed in a decadent garlic sauce, one you could smell and savor from across the table. The garlic and cheese Bruschetta was also delicious, with piles of fresh tomatoes and warm feta.

For some reason, we skipped right over the baked entrees, where the Baked Lasagna and the Eggplant Parmigiana were hiding on the menu. This was a mistake. I ventured over to a friend's table and almost asked her to scoot over when I saw the mountain of thick eggplant slices on her plate. She was greedy and didn't offer me a single bite, but she did reveal that it was "fantastic." (I often wander about restaurants with my fork in hand. Don't mind me.)

On this visit, I enjoyed the Chicken Piccata with a very light and elegant egg batter, artichokes, capers and lemon. The sauce was wonderful, and the servings were enormous. Instead of pasta, we opted for sautéed spinach, and it came to table with bits of fresh garlic and olive oil.

One of the boys picked a winner with his Gnocchi with Red Sauce. Each small dumpling was al dente, with great texture and flavor. In addition, the red sauce was just a light spoonful of fresh tomatoes, basil and garlic. I could eat this all day long.

I'm still enjoying the leftovers from the Veal Parmigiana and the Chicken Marsala. Both were served on platters (platters!) and filled with meat, pasta and sauce. The Marsala came with salty bits of prosciutto, scallions and mushrooms with a dark brown sauce that was just a shade too heavy and sweet. However, the thin medallions of veal were fork-tender. The red

sauce was as good as expected with just enough garlic, basil and oregano to give the tomatoes and mozzarella some excellent company.

All the entrees came with smart salads or soup and a choice of garlic or plain bread. Each salad was freshly plated with fresh, homemade dressings. Bread was plentiful and was served hot and crisp from the oven, with our efficient server replenishing it throughout the night. Instead of salad, I enjoyed a bowl of minestrone that was a bit light on the seasonings but did come with tons of vegetables.

A funny thing happened when I mentioned dessert. All of the grandmas said they couldn't possibly eat another bite. If that was the case, I wonder what happened to that very rich Tiramisu that was on the table for mere moments. One second it was there and the next . . . poof! It was gone. I tried to warn the boys: You've got to watch out for those grandmas. They're sneaky and they're quick.

While the rest of the table dueled over the remaining bite of Cannoli, I sighed and cursed the Mandarin Landing Shopping Center. Picasso's, Whole Foods, and now Enza's? It's just not fair to the rest of the city.