

Eating Out on \$50: Trattoria La Sorrentina in North Bergen
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Eating Out on \$50 is a monthly restaurant feature. Two people determined to spend only \$50 on dinner, drinks, tax and tip will discover just how much can be purchased for so little.

It was the devil himself playing comic relief. He ran all over Bergenline Avenue amid the dancers and singers in native garb, and little girls and young women decked out in crowns, sashes and fancy white dresses in the Hispanic Day parade. Every so often he'd dash over to the sidewalk and thrust his ugly, red mask of a face at someone in the crowd. And he managed not to scare anybody at all.

I saw all this from my table at the window at Trattoria La Sorrentina. It's likely there'll be no parade the day you visit La Sorrentina in North Bergen, which means that you'll just have to settle for a terrific meal.

You don't want to miss this place.

The brothers Vanacore, whose family has been in the restaurant business since the early '60s, opened La Sorrentina in 2003. They got some of their training working for their dad in his delicatessen and, later, his restaurant, and in culinary schools in Europe and New York, said Giacomo Vanacore, who described his job at La Sorrentina as "a lot of everything."

Trattoria La Sorrentina has a warm atmosphere. The tones are cherry red — from the serving pots to the half-brick walls to the napkins. There's a constant buzz of conversation, which never gets too loud for you to talk with your guest.

In my visit the dishes were carefully prepared and served in portions that put the word "generous" to shame. The prices were moderate yet slightly on the high side for the purposes of keeping the tab for two under \$50. But you and a guest can dine well if you choose entrees carefully and agree to share an appetizer and a dessert.

Here's what I mean about the portions and their relation to price. From the antipasto menu, my friend and I split an order of frittura alla Napoletana (\$10.95), a great collection of eight deep-fried morsels — two each of fried rice balls, potato croquettes, fried mozzarella sticks and small calzones. By itself this could be dinner unless you've just completed a 20-day fast. As an antipasto it's easily sufficient for two hungry people.

The rice balls were about the size of a Spalding hi-bouncer and flavored with chopped beef. The cooked cheese and the calzones were creamy inside and nicely crisp outside, while the potato croquettes were gently seasoned and smooth. My sense was that if I placed any or all these deep-fried objects on a blotter, I wouldn't have seen an oil stain. They were that well cooked, dry and crunchy.

Vanacore told me a few days after my visit that the dryness is the result of using high-grade soy cooking oil at extremely high temperatures — and changing it every day.

This frittura (fried) dish was accompanied by a thick red sauce containing large chunks of tomato. The menu described the sauce as spicy. I found it nicely thick, fruity and tasty — and mild as a young pup.

Service at La Sorrentina, incidentally, was knowledgeable and friendly. After I requested the antipasto, the waiter offered a thumbs-up gesture accompanied by an amiable "Good choice, good choice."

For dinner, I ordered linguine and littlenecks (\$14.95), which arrived in a big clay pot and was smoothly flavored with olive oil, white wine and what seemed like the entire 2009 California garlic crop. If this sets you back a step, inform the waiter. Me? I'm devoted to garlic.

There were 10 cooked clams in that pot, plus what seemed like a pound of linguine. This was a meal no mortal could finish.

Ravioli alla Positano (\$10.95), named for the town on the Amalfi coast where the Vanacore family originated, was a serving of six colossal ravioli in a mild marinara sauce.

Each was stuffed with a savory combination of cheeses: mozzarella, ricotta, Romano and parmesan. "Other than that, we like to keep it simple," Vanacore said, noting that the only thing he adds to the cheese is some strong black pepper.

For dessert, we split a large cannoli (\$2.50) that was crisp, smooth and, happily, a little less sweet than you usually get in Italian restaurants.

Now, with all due respect to my editor and this \$50-and-under assignment, allow me to say you can try La Sorrentina for a \$50 visit, but you might be tempted to return sometime when you're not limited. The cost of dinner came to \$50.11 with tax and tip.