

RESTAURANTS

In the Neighborhood

Every Diner Is Special Here,
as Are the Prices and the Food

By DAVID CORCORAN

THE LAST THING a restaurant critic wants is special treatment, and I thought I'd made a colossal mistake when I showed up at Taormina in the company of a regular. It was a busy Saturday night, and my companion, Joe, seemed to be the sun around which the entire restaurant revolved. He knew the specials before the waiter recited them. He had had all the best dishes. Plates of goodies showed up at our table unbidden. At one point, a tall man in chef's whites paid a call.

Joe: "So how's the risotto tonight? Any good?"

Chef: "It should be" — poking Joe

in the stomach — "all right!"

It was better than all right, with precise infusions of peas and arti-

choke, bacon and cheese, neither dry nor soupy, every grain of rice distinct. It was wonderful. But was it the kitchen, or was it Joe?

So for my second visit, I chose maximum anonymity. It was a Tuesday in darkest January. Snow swirled outside, on the wide commercial boulevard that bisects this little Union County town. Taormina was warm and inviting but something of a desert island, only three or four tables were occupied. None of my guests had heard of the place. Many weeks had passed since my first visit, and my chance of being recognized was minimal.

But once again, we were the center of the universe. The headwaiter — a companionable, consummate pro with a sense of humor as dry as grape — was if anything even more attentive than he was on my first visit. (He turned out to be Pasquale Di Iorio, a native of Tuscany who is a teacher during the day and who has been with Taormina since it opened four years ago.) And the food was as fine and as varied as anything Joe had coaxed from the kitchen.



By C. Becker for The New York Times

sake city but from Sicily's capital, Palermo. Before coming to the United States, Mr. Taormina spent time in Udine, in Italy's far northeast, and his goal is to present "co-cina regionale": cooking from virtually every region of his native country.

The menu changes every day, and its specials are each marked with the name of a region: Sicilia, Piemonte, Puglia, Abruzzo. That is not easy, Mr. Taormina said wearily the other day. But then he brightened: "For people who come in here, it's a new experience. They don't always see the same thing."

One thing worth seeing again and again can be found on the regular menu: a great platter of fried long hot peppers that Mr. Taormina says he finds at a farmers' market in Newark. This dish is not to be trifled with, and certainly not to be eaten alone. The peppers, shriveled and dark and glistening, hold enough B.T.U.'s to warm a small village, but the heat was modulated by generous shavings of excellent Parmesan.

Moscardini alla griglia, a special one night, was nothing more than white-and-purple chunks of brilliantly fresh baby octopus, grilled until sticky and crusty and lightly tossed with olive oil and lemon juice — one of those elemental, perfect dishes whose tastes and textures will stay fresh in memory for years.

Mussels marinara were fine, too, ample and tender in a robust tomato sauce with subtle sweetness and heat. Other appetizers were less dis-

house steak, was not of the highest quality, but it was redeemed by a vigorous broiled topping of bread crumbs and hot peppers.

Pork tenderloin might be prepared in the Tuscan style one night, Sicilian another. We had the Sicilian version, with pine nuts and golden raisins in a balsamic vinegar sauce. The meat was juicy and full-flavored, as it was in beautifully browned pork chops with green beans and lentils vegetables. Beef liver, ordered medium-rare and served that way, was firm and tangy, with a vinegary tangle of caramelized onions. Baked lemon sole was mild and meaty, with a leaning tower of mashed potatoes.

Pastas held much less interest. Penne Norma, with eggplant, tomato, basil and aged ricotta, was no better or worse than a thousand versions, and capellini Smaira (angel hair with shrimps, scallops, olives and capers) left little impression.

It's worth whatever dining strategy you can employ to save room for the cheesecake, which is so famous locally that Mr. Taormina sells dozens of them in 14-inch wheels at \$85 each. He won't divulge the recipe, but I suspect ricotta, vanilla and lemon are involved. The hazelnut gelato called *piandaja* is lighter and superb, and so is vanilla-scented panna cotta.

Taormina is the kind of place that sends out a platter of smoky roasted chestnuts along with dessert, whether or not you're a regular. It is decorated in the basic, functional, slightly timeworn style of middling Italian restaurants from here to Sardinia. Prices are gentle (a person is a lot to spend), and you supply the wine. In short, it is a neighborhood restaurant. May I have one in my neighborhood?

Taormina

402 Kentworth Boulevard, Kentworth
(908) 697-1717
www.ny.com/sites/taormina

GOOD

ATMOSPHERE A basic trattoria, with a welcome mat the size of Italy.

SERVICE Infectiously cordial.

WINE LIST Bring your own.

RECOMMENDED DISHES Grilled baby octopus, fried long hot peppers, mussels marinara, stewed rabbit, pork tenderloin, pork chops, risotto, cheesecake, gianduja, panna cotta.

PRICE RANGE Soups, salads and appetizers, \$5.95 to \$12.95; pastas, \$12.95 to \$14.95; entrees, \$14.95 to \$28.95.

HOURS Closed Mondays. Lunch, Tues-

days through Fridays, noon to 2:30 p.m.; dinner: Tuesdays through Thursdays, 5 to 10 p.m.; Fridays and Saturdays, 5 to 10:30 p.m.; Sundays, 3 to 8:30 p.m.

CREDIT CARDS American Express, MasterCard, Visa.

RESERVATIONS Recommended on weekends.

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS Accessible, with everything on one level; passageways can be narrow.

RATINGS Food, Fair, Satisfactory. Good, Very Good, Excellent, Extraordinary.

Reviews reflect the reviewer's reaction to food, ambience and service, with price taken into consideration. Menu listings and prices are subject to change.