

Fiorino

3572 Indian Queen Lane, 215-843-1500; www.fiorino.us

Long-suffering East Falls finally has a restaurant worth keeping, as veteran chef Franco Faggi (ex-Franco's Trattoria) makes a soft-spoken but satisfying return to a cozy corner BYO tucked up into the hillside neighborhood. Faggi's classic northern Italian fare is simple and familiar, but carefully prepared at fair prices, and served with the kind of personal charm that builds regulars

Enquirer review 11/27/2011

Fiorino

East Falls is eating up this new trattoria with vivid, homey northern Italian fare and a chef's caring hospitality.



Craig LaBan, Inquirer Restaurant Critic
Email Craig LaBan, follow Craig LaBan on Twitter

ABOUT THE RESTAURANT

Fiorino

3572 Indian Queen Lane
Philadelphia, PA 19129
215-843-1500

www.fiorino.us

Rating:



Neighborhood: East Falls

Parking: On street

Hours: Lunch Monday through Friday, 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Dinner Monday through Saturday, 5 to 10 p.m.; Sunday, 4 to 9 p.m. Sunday brunch, 10:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.

Prices: \$\$

Payment methods:

American Express

Discover

MasterCard

Visa

Cuisine type: Italian

Meals Served: **Brunch** - Sun. **Lunch** - Mon. thru Fri. **Dinner** - Mon. thru Sun.

Style: Long-suffering East Falls finally has a restaurant worth keeping, as veteran chef Franco Faggi (ex-Franco's Trattoria) makes a soft-spoken but satisfying return to a cozy corner BYO tucked up into the hillside neighborhood. Faggi's classic northern Italian fare is simple and familiar, but carefully prepared at fair prices, and served with the kind of personal charm that builds regulars.

"Now, I want you to tell me the truth," says Franco Faggi. "And this is important: What did you not like about my saltimbocca?"

He had not thundered out of the kitchen like an Italian movie chef might, outraged at the mere suggestion of scaloppine imperfection. No, the wiry and graying chef-owner of Fiorino in East Falls had emerged from his tiny kitchen under the most humble banner. His appearance was not prompted by a customer complaint - in fact, we had quite enjoyed the majority of our meal, from the vividly basiled tomato bruchette and pristine tuna carpaccio to my hearty stuffed pork chop.

But Fiorino's trusty server, Biaggio Vecchioni, had reported a less-than-devoured plate. And Faggi's brow was now furrowed in earnest, endearing concern. My guest, a judge, was not about to lie: "A bit too much sage" was her verdict.

"Thank you," he said, nodding a mental note.

The offending veal was struck from the bill without any request, and complimentary desserts had already been dispatched. But the fluffy handmade tiramisu was beside the point. Faggi's genuine interest in a customer's well-being had already forged the kind of bond - at once personal, charming, and sincere - that I so rarely see on display these days. It's an instinct Faggi honed long ago during his years in the dining room as one of the founding partners of Monte Carlo Living Room on South Street. But when you're tucked inconveniently up a hill in the middle of a neighborhood, on a one-way street accessed only by the most roundabout route, every patron counts.

Not that Fiorino's is lacking for business since it started this summer. Every one of the 11 tables in this tight and lively corner space, its stained-glass storefront windows and banquettes fronting Indian Queen Lane at a sharp angle, seemed to be filled during my visits. There was a big table singing "Happy Birthday," a pillow merchant, a host of neighbors, even the former Commish, John Timoney, revisiting an old friend in the hood. All of East Falls, it seems, was rejoicing in the arrival of a place they could call their go-to trattoria.

And who wouldn't? It's been a rough go for this neighborhood in the restaurant department, with an ever-changing roster of come-and-go operations near the prime crossroads of Midvale and Ridge, from the sudden departure of promising Fork & Barrel, to a revolving door at larger space near the river where Faggi himself spent nearly three years before, with Franco's Trattoria, before moving across the Schuylkill to Franco's Osteria.

The osteria was enormous, at 160 seats, especially compared to Fiorino's 35. But Faggi's menu offers the kind of familiar, homey Italian cooking that really translates best to the smaller, personal setting. It's not flashy or inventive food, but speaks to Faggi's Emilia-Romagna roots and classic sensibilities. And when I spooned through a bowl of one of his soulful homemade soups it was the subtle, soft-spoken things that made them so good. Flecks of rosemary brightened the prosciutto-steeped broth of the pasta e fagiolle. Toothsome elbow macaroni cradled tender ceci beans in a broth thickened just enough with a small dose of pureed chickpeas.

I love the touch of house-pickled eggplants and sweet-and-tangy cippolini onions on the generous antipasto, a platter also piled high with mortadella, chewy slices of soppressata, and tuna carpaccio wrapped with lemon around a wedge of milky sweet mozzarella. As good as that was, I preferred the tuna in its cappella performance, a sheer pink sheet across the plate dressed only with extra-virgin olive oil, a squeeze of lemon, and the crackle of salt flakes.

Faggi's best dish, likewise, is the height of minimalist finesse - an all-white bowl of Gorgonzola cream-glazed potato gnocchi so light, they evaporate in warm breath like creamy puffs of blue-cheese whimsy. It's the kind of indulgence that must be eaten immediately - hardly a problem when they were hot and levitating on a flash of forks from our bowl. I was punished for my greed in taking some home, only to find one hour later that they'd already turned leaden and pasty. The best things are fleeting that way.

A good Bolognese, though, is more enduring, especially for Faggi, who grew up just 50 miles southeast of Bologna. Faggi's all-beef rendition simmers over a mirepoix of veggies with red wine for hours, and when ladled over fresh ribbons of tagliatelle, it's just the bowl of Romagna comfort I'd crave regularly in my neighborhood - especially at \$16 an entree (or \$9 for a substantial "primi" starter portion).

Most of the menu entrees here are \$19 or less, allowing the kitchen food to present simple food as it is, with little embellishment to puff up prices. The spaghetti with clams is literally covered with littlenecks, the brothy gravy tinged

with just a flicker of garlic. The broth is blushed with a touch of tomato for the spaghetti Scoglio, which brings a bounty of assorted seafood.

The meat entrees in that price range are relatively delicate, including a pounded pork scaloppine Siciliana that comes with a roast pepper tucked cozily beneath a blanket of melted provolone; or the veal bocconcini that come wrapped like bullets around smoked mozzarella and spinach; or the aforementioned saltimbocca, so paper-thin it's no wonder sage dominated the meat.

Faggi delivers some more-substantial dishes with the nightly specials, which range into the mid-20s. In these cases, however, the minimalist approach - with cookie-cutter sides of sauteed kale and roast sweet potato wedges - was less impressive, especially the single fillet of branzino napped in bland butter sauce for \$22.50. We had better luck with the soulfully braised short rib over polenta, as well as the tender pork chop, stuffed South Philly-style with smoked cheese and broccoli rabe in a rosemary sauce, which I happily shared with the hungry judge.

By the time dessert arrived, we were more than sated despite their mild imperfections (the tiramisu was standard, but the cassata was store-bought Bindi, and the panna cotta a bit too jiggy). The best dessert, it turns out, was an airy "Booky's cheesecake" - a real blast from Philly's restaurant past. But then, so is Faggi. And ultimately, it is that old-school sense of hospitality that has endeared this humble trattoria to a grateful East Falls. After my own meals at Fiorino, I can see why it's been an easy sell.