

★★★ 1/2 – November 30, 2008 Star Ledger

“Count on Top-Notch Food and Service at LuNello”

by Cody Kendall

LuNello is a very predictable restaurant, and that's a good thing.

It's the type of place where you can bring guests with the assurance that the food, atmosphere and service will be high-quality, which is no small comfort in an increasingly uncertain world.

For 19 years, chef/owner Louis Seger has turned out stylish Italian-inspired meals. In 2007, the operation moved from Totowa to larger quarters with more parking space in Cedar Grove, which was a vast improvement.

The intimate bar/lounge is completely separate from the dining rooms, which ensures the integrity of the white-tablecloth atmosphere. The decor is elegant, but low-key in muted tones; the food provides the flash and color here. The noise level in general is moderate; even when every table is full on weekends, it's still bearable. An acoustic ceiling and thick carpeting help soak up the sound, making conversation generally pleasant, rather than leaving you hoarse.

A tradition at LuNello is the dramatic recitation of specials, which can be entertaining but frustrating as well. We timed it at our table: three and a half minutes, give or take a few seconds. Here's the problem: It's impossible to remember all (or even very many) of the specials, which means calling the waiter back for a replay of some items. Add to that inconvenience the fact that prices are never mentioned. I'm glad I asked the cost of the stone crab appetizer special. It was a budget-busting \$24.95, which means I didn't order it. Imagine if you hadn't bothered to inquire and learned the price only when it was printed on the bill -- ouch.

This is the way it's always been done at LuNello, and I'm guessing it won't change, but I suggest a printed list. Then if the waiter wants to recite a few items to keep his acting chops, great; at least patrons will have a frame of reference, complete with prices.

The specials are fun and often very imaginative. Yet there are so many appealing things on the regular menu that deciding what to order is deliciously difficult enough without even considering the specials.

For starters, I recommend the lump crabmeat (\$15.95) overflowing from a potato basket (think of a giant curved potato chip). It's tempting from both a visual and taste point of view. The crabmeat hardly needs the Dijon mustard sauce that comes with it, but some might welcome the contrast it provides.

You'll find such time-honored possibilities as fried calamari (\$10.50), baked clams with bread crumbs (\$10.95) or a tricolore salad (\$7.50), but there are also plenty of more exciting items. While the baby artichokes stuffed with bread crumbs (\$9.50) may seem as if they belong in the category above, they are presented in a no-muss, no-fuss way that makes them different and easy to eat. I was visualizing having to pluck the leaves and dip them, but these were completely ready for the fork, tender and easy to eat, with breadcrumbs, olive oil and garlic in exactly the right proportions.

Another first course selection with surprising style is the Portobello mushroom (\$11.95). This giant funghi was topped with a dollop of Brie, nicely browned, and treated with truffle oil that gave it glamor.

The pasta, whether as a separate course or as an entree, has real allure. Malffatti (\$15.50) ricotta dumplings judiciously touched with basil, were practically weightless despite a mozzarella component, and their fresh tomato sauce sparkled. Perhaps the most unusual pasta dish is the spaghettini (\$21.95) with shrimp, tomato and pepperoncini, those cunning little peppers, but the chef never forgets the folks who like to stick to what they know best. That would be the linguine with clams (\$17.95) in a red or white sauce, your choice, or the orecchiette (\$17.95) with sausage and broccoli rabe.

The entrees, be they fowl, meat or seafood, are expertly prepared, without the imbalance toward one or the other that we often see. Every dish gets equal treatment from the hands of a master. For those with sophisticated palates, tripe with polenta (\$17.95) or sauteed sweetbreads with burned butter and capers (\$24.95) will fill the bill. More middle-of-the-road tastes can go with plain organic, free-range chicken (\$19.50) enlivened by rosemary, garlic and sage. Fancier chicken is the Petto di Pollo Luigi (\$18.50) with a Yukon potato crust, like getting the main dish and a side in one bite. It came with broccoli rabe and a peppercorn sauce in its own little container.

Sauces are light, never overpowering the item with which they are served. A special of grilled Branzini (\$36.95), touched with white wine and lemon, was served with wild rice and herb sauce on the side, ensuring the pleasure of anyone who liked the fish as-is was not disrupted.

Lamb comes two ways; either as chops (\$34) prepared with capers, dried tomatoes and 40-year-old balsamic, or the classic roasted rack (\$32). A double-cut grilled veal chop (\$34.95) is the costliest item on the regular menu, but there is plenty of choice for less than \$25.

Wine, predominantly from the West Coast, Italy and France, with a smattering of other origins, is extremely pricey here. There is nothing for less than \$30 a bottle, and I found only one option for that amount. Figure on spending between \$42 to \$50 at the low end of the scale, though you can shell out much more; say \$100 if you want the ZD Reserve Chardonnay or \$200 for the Rutherford Hills Quintessa. The alternative is the limited number of wines by the glass; the Kenwood Yulupa Cabernet Sauvignon is one of several in the \$8 to \$8.50 range. Wines by the glass go up to \$11.50 for the Avalon Cabernet Sauvignon or \$12 for the Santa Margherita Pinot Grigio.

Desserts did not reach the heights of the appetizers, pasta and entrees, but they were more than serviceable. What I didn't like, however, was the lack of prices on the printed list of desserts, and the vagueness of the server (not our original waiter) when we asked the cost. He guessed, and though he was only off by a dollar or so, accuracy would have been appreciated. That was the sole nonprofessional moment we experienced in terms of service, which otherwise was slick and skilled.

A white chocolate bread pudding (\$8.50) with caramel sauce was rather bland but lighter than the usual version of this dessert. Profiteroles (\$8.50) with fresh whipped cream came with a choice of unusual ice creams (not made in-house), which included Dutch apple and pistachio. Drizzled with a dark chocolate sauce, these little puffs of stuffed pastry were quite an indulgence. Carrot cake (\$9) was a different version. Instead of the usual cream cheese icing, this compact sweet came with dulce de leche sauce and pumpkin ice cream.

If you want to go to LuNello on a Saturday night, it's wise to make a reservation two weeks in advance, as the place is packed. Although reservations are taken for couples Mondays through Fridays, on Saturday nights, they are accepted only for parties of four or more.

While we were there, regulars already were making reservations for the holidays, when I suspect tables at LuNello will be even more in demand.

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