

DINE OUT MAINE: SHONNA MILLIKEN HUMPHREY

On wine list and menu, Espo's Trattoria puts it all together

Categorizing Italian food is like categorizing United States food. It varies. Alabama is not famous for its clam chowder, and it takes an effort to find hush puppies in Maine.

Likewise, many of us are familiar with the Italian central region's red sauce and pasta without realizing the northern Swiss border areas are more likely to serve polenta. Bologna provides an abundance of mortadella, while southern Sicily offers oranges, lemons, almonds and olives. (Note: Sicilians also claim they invented the meatball.)

Italy is fanatically regional in its cuisine. Add individual homestyle expectations, and the challenge of finding an authentic Italian restaurant gets as complex as "authentic" becomes a loaded term.

Italian friends often cringe at the general perception of their cuisine, citing all manner of culinary inaccuracies, while I argue that holding fast to a single word often means missing a bigger picture: Authentic or not, good food tastes good. So while native-born Italians debate the authenticity of Italian menus, know that Espo's Trattoria in Portland serves very tasty food.

Located on outer Congress Street, it's family-owned and operated, as explained by cheerful server Briana Esposito. When she arrived at the table with Parmesan cheese and olive oil, her friendly energy was welcome on a cold night.

The dining room was dimly lit and the tables well-spaced – not overly cozy, but neither did we have to shout conversation. The area lacked contemporary design, but it was also refreshingly void of stereotype: Not a candle wax-covered wine bottle in sight.

A self-conscious, dressed-up young couple on a first date sat at the table to the right, and a family with two little ones took the table behind us.

Although Espo's delivered an overall fabulous experience, it



Photos by Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer

was not before first delivering very cold, stale-tasting bread. Olive oil and cheese did little to rescue the bread, and it was a disappointing start.

Disappointing, that is, until the wine arrived.

I love to wonder about restaurant wine lists – who does the choosing? The chef? The wine sales guy? At Espo's, it's someone who clearly understands the intricacies of food pairings.

The by-the-glass wine list is where Espo's gets good – and by good, I mean excellent. Not for originality or price, but for a clear understanding of food enhancement. The house Chianti was Placido, the Montepulciano was Masciarelo, and the Rosso? A Francis Ford Coppola blend, each for \$5.95 to \$7.95.

More on this wine in a moment. Given the bread's initial impression, I expected the Caprese Salad (\$6.99) in January to be a stretch. Maine's limited growing season is not conducive to year-round plump, summer Heirlooms, but the Espo's

winter tomatoes were fine. The basil was fresh, the mozzarella smooth, and the balsamic was sweetly acidic.

The side-order meatball (\$4.99) was the size of a baseball, covered with homemade red sauce and well-mixed with no hint of dryness or crumble, ample enough for the entire table to taste.

The dinner menu offered a mix of pastas, salads, steaks and seafood. We chose traditional favorites Linguine with Gorgonzola (\$16.99 with shrimp

added), Chicken Marsala (\$15.99), Linguine with Alfredo Sauce (\$9.99) and Meat Lasagne (\$15.99).

Gorgonzola is a strong-tasting cheese. It's strong-smelling too, and people tend to love it or hate it, but Espo's kitchen used a rare and delicate magic to create a cream sauce with just a hint of that ripe flavor. Nothing about the sauce was overwhelming in any way. It tasted rich, but with no off-putting pungency.

Remember that wine? The

Rosso – a blend of Zinfandel, Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah – was outstanding when sipped solo, but together with the gorgonzola sauce, it was magnificent. The food made the robust wine taste more complex, while the wine enhanced the subtle flavors of the food.

It was the same for the Chianti and the Montepulciano. These wines each struck a fabulous food-beverage balance. Taken separately, delicious. Put together? Heaven. (I also noted Vieve Clicquot's appearance on the wine list for \$69. Not for this night, but definitely as a special-occasion treat.) Well done, Espo's!

The alfredo sauce for the linguine met a specific barometer: As we lingered and chatted, the sauce stayed creamy with no sign of congeal or cornstarch-y flavor as it cooled. The shrimp was not native to Maine, but it tasted firm and not overcooked.

The meat lasagne portion could feed three, and in addition to its four cheeses, included ground sirloin, sausage and pepperoni – I swear it weighed several pounds when hefted across the table.

The star of the evening, however, was the Chicken Marsala. In the world of Italian eateries, there is marsala sauce, and then there is the sweet, ambrosia-like substance that reflects all the subtle texture and layers of a good Marsala wine at Espo's. If that description reads a bit precious, it's because the sauce was that good. Honest. We were eating the sauce with spoons.

For carb watchers, there is the option to have that marsala sauce served over a choice of chopped spinach instead of pasta. (If you can't decide, Espo's has no problem with a half-serving each.) Marsala sauce over chopped, steamed spinach? It was a delicious twist on a steakhouse-style favorite. Try it. The spinach is frozen and steamed, as is the non-native shrimp. Do not let this worry

DINING REVIEW

ESPO'S TRATTORIA
1335 Congress St., Portland 774-7923 (no website, but there is a Facebook page)
★★★½ stars
HOURS: 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Sunday to Thursday; 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Friday and Saturday
BAR: Yes, full
CREDIT CARDS: All major
PRICE RANGE: \$2.99 to \$21.99
VEGETARIAN: Yes
GLUTEN-FREE: Yes
KID-FRIENDLY: Kid's menu
WHEELCHAIR ACCESS: Yes
BOTTOM LINE: Espo's Trattoria offers a traditional expectation of Italian favorites in a laid-back, comfortable atmosphere. Portions are enormous, pricing is fair, and the wine list shows a native food pairing intelligence. Try the marsala sauce over spinach.

Ratings follow this scale and take into consideration food, atmosphere, service and value: ★Poor ★★★Fair ★★★Good ★★★★★Excellent ★★★★★★Extraordinary. The Maine Sunday Telegram visits an establishment twice if the first dining experience was unsatisfactory. The reviewer dines anonymously.

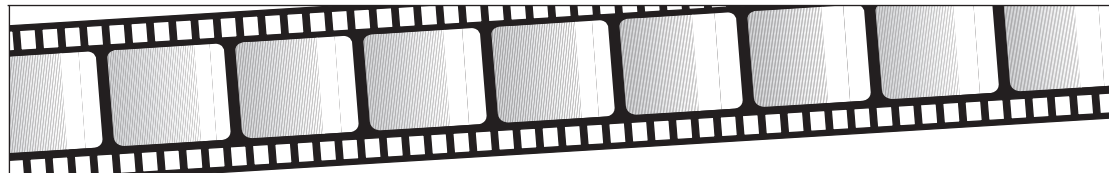
you. It tastes good.

My friends and I met up in the comfortable dining room, were seated quickly on a Wednesday night, and spent a few lovely hours talking careers, wedding plans, travel and relationships.

Server Briana kept us fed, offered suggestions and encouraged us to linger. We never once felt rushed, the food was a delicious experience, and the setting was conducive to quiet conversation.

While the menu may raise debate among native-born Italians, I promise that Espo's is an authentic good time.

Shonna Milliken Humphrey is a freelance writer and author of the novel "Show Me Good Land."



Readers pick the Oscars Official Ballot

- Prizes will be awarded to some entrants, picked at random from among those who picked the most winners correctly.
- Ballots must be received in our office at One City Center by 5 p.m. Feb. 24 or online at www.pressherald.com. (Oscars will be announced Feb. 26.) One ballot per person. Duplicate copies will not be accepted.
- The winners will be announced in the Audience section of the March 4 Maine Sunday Telegram.
- Employees of MaineToday Media Inc. and their immediate families are not eligible.

1. Best picture:

- "The Artist"
- "The Descendants"
- "Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close"
- "The Help"
- "Hugo"
- "Midnight in Paris"
- "Moneyball"
- "The Tree of Life"
- "War Horse"

2. Best actor:

- Demian Bichir in "A Better Life"
- George Clooney in "The Descendants"
- Jean Dujardin in "The Artist"
- Gary Oldman in "Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy"
- Brad Pitt in "Moneyball"

3. Best actress:

- Glenn Close in "Albert Nobbs"
- Viola Davis in "The Help"
- Rooney Mara in "The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo"
- Meryl Streep in "The Iron Lady"
- Michelle Williams in "My Week With Marilyn"

4. Best supporting actor:

- Kenneth Branagh in "My Week With Marilyn"
- Jonah Hill in "Moneyball"
- Nick Nolte in "Warrior"
- Christopher Plummer in "Beginners"
- Max von Sydow in "Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close"

5. Best supporting actress:

- Berenice Bejo in "The Artist"
- Jessica Chastain in "The Help"
- Melissa McCarthy in "Bridesmaids"
- Janet McTeer in "Albert Nobbs"
- Octavia Spencer in "The Help"

6. Best director:

- Michel Hazanavicius for "The Artist"
- Alexander Payne for "The Descendants"
- Martin Scorsese for "Hugo"
- Woody Allen for "Midnight in Paris"
- Terrence Malick for "The Tree of Life"

Mail to:

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STAFF GRAPHIC | MICHAEL FISHER

OSCAR

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ing actor category, for instance, it's a choice between old and new. The relatively young Jonah Hill ("Moneyball") is up against a roster of film veterans with probably 150 years of movie experience between them: Kenneth Branagh, Nick Nolte, Christopher Plummer and Max von Sydow.

The incentive to vote in this poll is the chance to show off your movie knowledge and, of course, to gain some bragging rights. You will also be eligible for a prize. Of those who pick the most winners, we'll randomly select some to win a prize, to be determined later. (It's a movie contest, so we needed some suspense.)

To cast your votes in our poll, see the ballot above. Or see it online at pressherald.com. Either way, for your ballot to count, it must be received at our offices

in One City Center, Portland, by 5 p.m. Feb. 24. One ballot per person, please.

The Oscars will be handed out Feb. 26, live on ABC, beginning at 7 p.m.

A story about how well Mainers did in picking the Oscars – and who did best – will run in the Maine Sunday Telegram on March 4.

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THOMSON

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over coffee at Arabica. "I realized I could move anywhere I wanted, and I decided to make it here. Portland has all of the big-city things with a small-city feel."

"Mercy" is Thomson's 29th book and fifth novel. She writes almost exclusively for the young-adult and children's markets, but notes with a smile, "Grown-ups are allowed to read it too."

BASED ON A TRUE STORY

Thomson's book tells the story of 14-year-old Haley Brown, who lives in modern-day Rhode Island. She traces her family history and finds a vampire in her ancestral past.

The vampire part of the story is true, Thomson said. Mercy Brown died in 1892 at age 19 in the midst of a tuberculosis outbreak across New England. Hysteria bred superstition, which led authorities to suspect that Mary was a vampire. They ordered the body exhumed from her grave in Exeter, R.I. Fueled by ignorance and frenzy, townsfolk confirmed their suspicions and desecrated Brown's body after her casket was opened.

Thomson incorporates that true story while creating a fictional contemporary component. She introduces 14-year-old Haley to tell the story as she uncovers her family history while researching a school project.

"Mercy" takes advantage of the resurgent popularity of vampires without indulging it, said Kirsten Cappy, who works in Portland and handles marketing for several children's authors across the country. Thomson is her client.

She thinks the book works because Thomson plays with a different vampire legend.

"I think there is some vampire fatigue setting in. We're all 'Twilighted' out," Cappy said. "But Sarah has done something very different. She thought about the vampire legend when we really did believe in vampires, when they were frightening, frightening things."

"But the most terrifying thing of all is ignorance. All of the finger-pointing and blame that is put on a single teenage girl is far more terrifying than what we put in fiction."

Connie Burns, Mahoney Middle School librarian in South Portland, passed the book around at a book club. The students loved the book, and invited Thomson in for a chat.

"I really liked that Sarah tapped into the vampire frenzy, but she didn't romanticize the vampires," said Burns. "She took that vampire interest and spun a historical tale out of it." Justin Busque, 20, read the book after meeting Thomson at a book event organized by the Portland Public Library. He enjoyed the parallel stories within "Mercy" and proclaimed it "beautifully done, vivid in detail and an excellent mix between fiction and true story."

This is the first book for Yarmouth-based Islandport Press targeted at young adults, said senior editor Melissa Kim.

"Sarah is a great writer," Kim said. "She is well published and very experienced. She has a quality to her that we are always delighted to have. It was a treat for us to say, 'Sarah, we would love to work with you.'"

Thomson landed on her idea for the book somewhat by default. An editor at another publishing house solicited a proposal for a vampire book to take advantage of the "Twilight" craze. Thomson hurried off a five-page proposal, which was summarily rejected.

IF YOU DON'T SUCCEED AT FIRST ...

Still interested in the idea, Thomson stumbled across the New England vampire tradition, and in so doing, found the Mercy Brown story.

"It was a remarkable story because it was true," she said. "We live in such a romanticized vampire world. This took you back to the days when vampires were not a fantasy. Mercy's story is a true story. Her family dug her up. This was a way to get original with vampires and go back to when they really were scary."

Thomson always wanted to be a writer. It's all she ever remembers wanting to be growing up, but assumed such a goal was out of reach. "I thought real people couldn't do it."

Her first novel, "The Dragon's Son," published in 2001, started as a high school novel. She worked on it through college and finished it sometime later. It stayed in her drawer for years, safe from the public eye.

"The lovely thing about having

it in a drawer is that nobody reads it," she said, laughing.

Thomson grew up in the Midwest – in St. Louis and Madison, Wis. Her world was populated by J.R.R. Tolkien, Lloyd Alexander, Charlotte Bronte and Jane Austen.

She earned a bachelor's in English from Oberlin, and after graduation headed to New York for a job in publishing. She edited children's books at HarperCollins and Simon & Schuster, all the while remembering her novel tucked safely away in the drawer. She allowed a friend to read it, who liked it. It was passed up the chain of command.

Thomson was devastated when the rejection letter arrived. "The first rejection is painfully crushing," she said.

But she overcame the hurt and kept trying. And now, all these years later, she feels blessed that she supports herself and a child while working as a writer. It's particularly gratifying when organizations like Barnes and Noble call attention to your work.

"When you get something like Barnes and Noble's best fiction of 2011, you know it connected," she said. "That's all you can hope for. It's your baby. You send it out in the world, and you don't know what will happen."

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