

Dining Out

with **TED POWERS**

Ciao Bello

Whenever I write about a restaurant, I enjoy talking to the owner or the general manager to get some background that I can't otherwise find on their website. Walking into the dining room at Ciao Bello, I was greeted by general manager David Siegman. After spending a couple of hours eating and talking with him, I knew that he was bright, sharp, knew the menu, the recipes and the wines and was very personable. Tony Vallone picked a winner to highlight the front of the house. To my surprise, I found out that Siegman was the grandson of Joel Mandel, of blessed memory, a past president of Congregation Beth Yeshurun, and Shirley Mandel.

Ciao Bello is a wonderful, first-class restaurant, with more moderate pricing compared to most fine-dining places. Service is excellent, without being intrusive, the ambiance beautiful, with high ceilings, exquisite art, tall windows, comfortable seating and tables relatively far apart.

When I commented on how fresh and delicious my fish was, Siegman told me, "I have a butcher in house every day at 6 a.m. to fillet whole fish and slice our beef. ... I think the hallmark of a great restaurant is the dedication to the ingredients that requires having a skilled hand on site to fillet the freshest fish and meats!"

Dinner began with two wines: a Foris Pinot Noir and Vietti Barbera d'Asti. Both were incredible and highlighted a list containing exciting, small, batch wines that demonstrate the diversity of great Italian wine making.

My first appetizer was Scamorza

Bruschetta, with lightly smoked mozzarella, crushed tomatoes and basil on grilled Tuscan bread. I'm not usually a fan of bruschetta, but this one was a knockout version, and I will order it again. Another fabulous app was Crispy Baby Artichokes. I ate and loved every leaf and heart of these beauties – great for sharing! I skipped soup on this trip, but Wedding Soup, with chicken meatballs, is very comforting, especially on cold, blustery days. If you adore pizza, as I do, Ciao Bello has many choices that can be shared as an appetizer or served as a main dish.

I wanted a pasta dish, and when I saw Osso Buco Ravioli, I had to order it. Only a Vallone kitchen could come up with this one. The ravioli was stuffed with slow-braised veal and served with marinara and wild mushrooms. OK, so the meat didn't fall off the bone and you don't get the marrow like the namesake dish, but it was outstanding. All pastas are fresh and handmade using ingredients, from Italian markets, like flour, bottled water, Sicilian sea salt and unfiltered Sicilian olive oil. At Ciao Bello, it all comes together in extraordinary taste.

For the main dish, I had a new favorite, B.A.'s Veal Romana. Delicately sautéed Provimi (natural, no hormones) Veal Scallopine was served with crispy capers, wild mushrooms and a long-stemmed artichoke. The presentation was gorgeous. and the taste fabulous. I also tasted Pan Roasted Atlantic Salmon. This was as good as salmon gets – crispy on the outside and moist and delicious inside. I loved the accompaniments – Venetia black rice, sweet peppers and Meyer lemon emulsion. The black rice is something else; I want to see that used more often.

The dessert tray was filled with dazzling choices. My table shared a couple. I couldn't pick a winner; they were both incredible. The first



one was Cannoli Cake. Just picture a layered cake with cannoli custard in between layers – wow! The other was Strawberry Ricotta Cassata, also known as Italian Wedding Cake. To die for!

For your Bar/Bat Mitzvah party, rehearsal dinner or any special event, Ciao Bello offers private dining for 35 guests in the beautiful upstairs private room or 110 in the covered and air-conditioned patio.

Ciao Bello is the place to go for exceptional Italian food – original, creative and mouthwatering delicious. It also is the place to see and be seen. It is located at 5161 San Felipe St., at Sage Road, 713-960-0333, ciaobellohouston.com. It is open for lunch and dinner, Monday to Friday, Saturday dinner and Sunday for brunch and dinner.



Ciao Bello Dining Room