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Eating Out feature by Tony Love.

"Honest North Italian cuisine is in the Ambrosini's blood".

Eating out can mean so much more than just that - a quick dish, a glass of wine or the works. It can also be about the whole experience beyond the stoves and plate - location, design, atmosphere and the care and attention you receive.

At Ambrosini's, it's all about the food, the wine and the service - nothing more, nothing less. It's named after the family that's been in the kitchen and on the floor, quietly plying their trade for 15 years and long before that at Asio's in the city. Big-city atmosphere, attitude, swank and pretence are not on the cards here. What is evident is pride in the family's northern Italian heritage and its cuisine-hearty fare from the alpine region of Lombardy. The restaurant is an unassuming little cottage on Magill Rd, Norwood, just east of the Osmond Tce, intersection. Inside, on a hot day, the fans are swishing slowly, and with just half an hour's warning for lunch, a table is waiting with cool water poured and a generous welcome ready. Several groups of mature businessmen are getting down to lunch, away from the CBD bang and crash; at dinner a few days later, the locals are casual and friendly.

Then there's the music. A selection of rustic accordion, world music guitar, Elvis Costello, Norah Jones and who knows what else in between, all at above ambient volume levels - can be a bit off-putting even if I do fancy the songs of this Elvis. Singing on restaurant soundtracks distracts diners from more important things.

Paul Ambrosini, at front-of-house, obviously considers his wine list to be one of those. There are sherries, 10 wines by the glass and a clever spread of drinks, predominantly from South Australian regions and fairly priced. Nine Italian wines start at \$28.50 for a bottle of fresh, dry Verdicchio and head up to \$98 for a big Barolo, but you can start your journey by the glass with the former (\$6.50) or a spicy, well-flavoured Montepulciano d'Abruzzo at \$7.50. Both are enjoyable and a smart way to explore new flavours without betting the bank. Another plus here - the wines by the glass and the Italian bottles each have a short profile to aid your selection.

The menu holds few surprises, and a noticeable lack of tomato-based dishes befitting the Ambrosinis' regional dedication. This alone is worth a visit, simply to see another side of Italian cuisine.

A bresaola to begin is a thing of beauty, a fan of cured silverside, thinly sliced, drizzled with a good, fruity olive oil and set with a simple fresh and pickled salad, topped by generous shavings of good parmesan. A pasta with roast pumpkin, ricotta and sage also has all the hallmarks of good rustic cuisine - no frills, earthy and aromatic.

If your desire is for something more muscly in the early rounds, there are entree sizes in risotto, prawns, lamb brains and chicken livers, the last pink, soft, with sage and the edge of prosciutto in a big, rich sauce.

The risotto is a daily specials affair; this one seafood, and well explained by our waiter. Chunks of clean, white flathead, soft strips of calamari and fresh king prawns sit in saffroned grains on the soft side of the risotto spectrum, a clever balance of seafood sweetness and creamy texture.

Chef Remo Ambrosini has a thing about presenting pretty dishes, and his chicken roulade, Atlantic salmon and beef fillet are all very attractive on the plate.

The fish is all pastels of pink, with a white wine, butter and tarragon sauce adding muted greens. But those elements give the fish a big, overweight flavour. The steak is an excellent piece of meat, cooked expertly and carrying a good dose of the promised earthy porcini glaze-in fact, it's swimming in a big plate of it. But it's all about the well-crafted flavours.

Less successful are slices of veal with a basil, spinach and marjoram pesto. This is not a pretty dish, but the meat is fine, the sauce a bit undefined; a lemon wedge, however, helps to elevate it. Note, too, that all mains are accompanied by good plates of complimentary vegetables.

The chef's preoccupation with sauce-driven dishes continues into dessert territory, with three gelatiscent vanilla, peach and mango flavoured with a berry and mango coulis; this, in fact, helps, as the ices are a little down on big-fruit impact.

An amaretti and maraschino cherry semifreddo is stylish and too big in almond flavours. Best of all is raspberry bavarois topped by mango slices, on a layer of strong, jellied red fruit at the bottom of a scotch glass. Ambrosini's isn't the place to go to prove your hipness, but a restaurant where you get love and attention in the kitchen and at the tables.

There are few surprises, but a reassuring honesty in the craft of cooking and the pleasure of dining at very reasonable prices. The dining room could be updated to reflect that in the kitchen there are now three generations under the elder Amabile who still helps in preparation. The Ambrosini family's pride in their food and wine traditions is worth showing off to a younger audience.

The bill

Entrees: \$12.90-\$19.90

Mains: \$18.90-\$23.90

Desserts: \$8-\$10.50 (cheese)

Vegetarian options: Two pastas, entree and main sizes. Plenty of seafood.

Wheelchair access: Yes Outdoors: A little courtyard. Wine list: Good, with Italian selection

Corkage: \$10 a bottle

Summary

While the dining room and plated dishes resemble Vogue magazine styling, circa 1990, the northern Italian flavours, attitude and value here is the real stuff, with reassuring generosity and integrity.