



Shaken & stirred



▶ Feast on quality Italian food at Martini Café, 59 The Parade, Norwood

REVIEW

By KYLIE FLEMING

It is no coincidence that food and service tends to be better in restaurants where the chef also happens to be the big cheese.

Owner/chefs have a vested interest and are all too aware survival rests on repeat business. This is definitely the case at Martini Café at Norwood, run by chefs/owners Domenic Martino and Larry Piscioneri. The pair are turning out a high-standard of Italian food at the quieter end of The Parade.

Martini successfully melds whiz-bang food and wine with a relaxed, unpretentious vibe. The restaurant, which began its life as Caffè Medici in the early nineties, still looks and feels good with separate dining rooms with polished floorboards and sympathetic lighting. Tables have cute little frosted glass candle holders and white linen cloths covered with butchers' paper, handy for scribble-crazy dining companions. Thankfully, the tacky black and white Hollywood posters from a previous ownership are gone in favour of pale lavender walls.

On arrival, Alex at front of house was charming and brought a maturity to this crucial but oft-neglected role. Martini's wine list is excellent with a thoughtful range of varieties, some good-value bottles and a few goodies available by the glass. A reserve list underlines the owners' interest in wine.

We started with a glass of the dependable Cantine Pra Soave from Italy and later moved onto a bottle of Kooyong Massale Pinot Noir, one of Sandro Mosele's impressive Mornington Peninsula wines.

Pre-dinner bread includes a little bit of theatre with an individual warm, ciabatta loaf served on a breadboard with three little bowls of goats cheese, olive oil and chilli pesto. It's a small meal in itself and makes you rethink whether you need an entree.

Entrées (\$14 to \$16) centre on authentic Italian dishes with vongole (cockles) steamed in garlic, parsley and white wine or grilled portobello mushrooms with taleggio cheese. The antipasto plate looked fantastic including olives, vitello tonnato (veal), frittata, olive oil and poached octopus.

Entrée of chargrilled quail (quaglia alla griglia) was superb with the plump birds served in a dark-coloured honey, grappa and chilli sauce with magnificent depth of flavour. An accompanying warm radicchio salad added a mildly bitter edge in this generous dish.

Caciocavallo is a cow's milk cheese which is similar to provolone or mozzarella and it provided the backbone for this entrée. Thick, grilled pieces of melty soft cheese were paired with sweet slow-roasted tomatoes, grilled asparagus spears, roasted garlic and basil. Very distinctive, simpatico flavours.



Dominic Martino and Larry Piscioneri, of Martini Cafe. PICTURE: HEIDI LINEHAN 65902

Martini was humming along very nicely by 8pm with good turn-out for a midweek evening and nearby tables occupied by a diverse crowd including a local Indian restaurateur and a large table of well-behaved "blokes".

Martini's main courses (\$17-\$32) include a list of pasta offerings with a formaggio lover's delight - housemade gnocchi with gorgonzola, mascarpone and reggiano. Another dish to keep mind is the classic saltimbocca milkfed veal with prosciutto and sage which looked great as it passed by to another table. On this evening, Alex managed to sell the specials very well.

He admitted he'd eaten some of the homemade lasagne for lunch and made it sound tempting. And, indeed, it was delicious - a serious slab of layered pasta and meat in a thick, rich tomato base studded with real meat, not mince, pieces.

A second main course, also from the specials list, was slow-cooked goat with extremely tender chunks of meat in a stocky sauce with potato pieces. The goat meat was tender but there were too many bony parts for my liking. The only oversight was the green salad which never arrived.

Dessert was a shared baci pannacotta which wasn't too ridiculously sweet, in fact, the chocolate/hazelnut flavour was almost a bit too light. But the dish was artfully presented and was heavenly teamed with a Dutschke SunRaisined Shiraz from the Barossa.

Martini hits above the mark with its excellent Italian cooking, relevant wine focus and warm service away from the throng of more mediocre cafés up the road.

The bill



- ▶ Ciabatta al forno \$7
- ▶ Quaglia Griglia \$15
- ▶ Caciocavallo \$15
- ▶ Goat special \$30
- ▶ Lasagne \$18
- ▶ Baci pannacotta \$14