

Fresco's
Rte 16, Mendon, MA
508-473-2369

DINING REVIEW: by *Barbara VanReed*

The word 'fresco' brings to mind Italian Renaissance wall art, and indeed a brightly painted mural adorns one wall of Fresco's on Rt. 16 in Mendon. Proprietors Sean and Kim Terrell opened their restaurant two years ago, and it has become a popular place, with weekend-night waits of up to an hour.

Fresco's dining room and kitchen are one open space, with a 10-stool bar separating the two. It's crowded and cozy in the dining section; every table has a good view of the white-clad chefs busy working in the kitchen. It's a

casual, friendly, upbeat place, with burnt orange color-washed walls, and other attributes that offset the cold drafts of air that sometimes blow in a bit with customers during the winter months.

We came early on a Friday evening and had to wait just 10 minutes to be seated. We found two empty stools at the bar, and had just ordered a glass of wine when our table was ready. The waitress brought a basket of sliced Italian bread and butter, while we started reading the menu, listening to mellow rock music, Neil Diamond's Sweet Caroline.

The food theme at Fresco's is definitely Italian, with familiar piccata and Marsala sauces, but it also includes a lot of variations on the theme with some interesting approaches. Sean collaborates with his chef staff to come up with new menu ideas.

The appetizer selections include calamari (\$6.99), mozzarella sticks (\$6.99), littlenecks (\$7.99) and steamed mussels (\$8.99).

We began with a house side salad, dense with greens, light and dark croutons, carrots, tomatoes, red onions, cucumbers and bits of egg, with an Asiago dressing. It was much better than what sometimes passes for a restaurant salad, the quickly assembled bowl of iceberg, cucumber and tomato slice still cold from the frig.

The pasta section of the menu begins with a "create your own dish" from a selection of five pastas, eight sauces, and several additions. Pasta entrée items include pasta carbonara, sautéed chicken fillets with mushrooms, peas and bacon in an Alfredo sauce (\$13.99), eggplant parmesan (\$12.99) and linguini with clam sauce (\$13.99). The pasta Victoria, penne pasta tossed with grilled chicken fillets, crushed tomatoes, mushrooms, onions and spinach in a balsamic white wine garlic butter sauce (\$12.95), was high on our short list of choices for our meal, but we skipped to the next section.

The chicken entrees start with a saltimbocca, thinly sliced prosciutto, sage and mozzarella cheese in a white wine lemon butter sauce (\$14.99). There is also chicken amore, which has sautéed chicken breasts with roasted red peppers, toasted cashews, wild mushrooms and spinach in a roasted garlic cream sauce (\$14.99).

Next on the menu is seafood, starting with a traditional cioppino: shrimp, scallops, mussels, littleneck clams, haddock and calamari in a garlic tomato seafood broth served over linguini (16.99). We two diners chose our entrees from this section, the salmon Chloe (\$15.99) and Jimmy's seafood sauté (\$17.99). The salmon was a baked fillet topped with a pesto cream sauce, and served over risotto. We haven't often seen this combination on a menu, and found it intriguing. It was a superb choice, the cream sauce

had just the right basil flavor, the salmon was very fresh, and the risotto just sticky enough and tasty.

Our second choice, Jimmy's seafood sauté, was a generous and rich plateful of shrimp, scallops and a small portion of lobster meat with wild mushrooms and sweet red peppers in a basil lemon cream sauce, served over linguini.

Don't care for seafood? Then go on to the veal and beef choices, which include a 12 oz. Black Angus New York sirloin steak (\$15.99) and the classic French filet au poivre, twin filet mignons encrusted with black peppercorns, seared with wild mushrooms in a brandy cream sauce, served over garlic crostinis (\$17.99).

Lastly, there is a page of pizza possibilities, with specialties such as "The Fresco" and "Healthy Heart" (\$13.99).

Desserts include tiramisu (\$4.75), cannolis (\$4.50), and cheesecake (\$5.95).

Sean Terrell was the sous chef at a well-known restaurant in Milford, and with 15 years of experience, wanted to establish his own place. When Vincenzo's Trattoria moved to Bellingham in 2004, the space at 95 Uxbridge St. became available, and the Terrells were on their way. He says it took eight months, and many 80-hour weeks after that to get Fresco's operational and humming, and now he's down to working 60 hours a week. His dedication and enthusiasm for the place is contagious.

Kim's role in the business: she takes care of the operations end of the business, and is in charge of the wall art. Sean tells us that Kim was 8-months pregnant with daughter Chloe when she painted the Venetian mural.

Like Vincenzo's Trattoria before it, Fresco's attracts lots of local regulars, some come three or four times a week, says Sean. He caters to them with a variety of daily specials, including Chinese and Mexican, so that they don't get bored with the standard menu. Sean is also happy to customize any menu item for food allergies or preferences. And there is one more thing he will do, give away his recipe secrets. Well, maybe not the secret, but he will tell you all about it. While we were there, he spent several minutes with some happy customers discussing the "Autumn Chicken" entrée on the day's specials. It was an interesting dish of chicken breast sautéed with Granny Smith apples, walnuts, sun-dried cranberries and spinach in an apple brandy butter sauce (\$14.99).

The wine list at Fresco's is prepared in consultation with Martignetti's and reflects the Best of Boston list. It includes choices such as Trinity Oaks Pinot Noir, Silverado Cabernet Sauvignon, and Oyster Bay Sauvignon Blanc. Wine by the glass starts at \$4.50 and bottles at \$18. There is also an extensive beer selection.

Fresco's is an asset in the Valley dining scene. It has just one drawback that's hard to overcome. The building is small and the dining room feels a bit cramped. Sean hopes that next summer he will have a permit for an outside waiting area with bar service, so the wait will be more pleasant.

Meanwhile, plan ahead, as the restaurant will take reservations for groups of five or more, and also offers call-ahead seating. Call 508-473-2369. No website as of yet. Children's menu available. Take out available. The building is handicapped accessible, the restroom is not. Tues-Thurs 4:00- 9:00 pm, Fri-Sat. 4:00-10:00 pm, Sunday 4:00-8:00 pm. Closed Mondays.