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Local Flavor: Ribollita

Where: 41 Middle St., Portland When: Dinner Tue.-Thur., 5-9 pm, Fri.-Sat., 5-10 pm How: 774-2972

2008-04-09



Jill Brady

Ribollita soup is not to be missed for diners who crave a starter at this classy spot.



Jill Brady

Asparagus and ricotta ravioli at Ribollita on Middle Street in Portland.

Good to know

Veggie dishes? - Most of the menu features pasta and veggies.

Meat & potatoes meals? - You want pasta, trust me.

Free parking? - Plenty of two-hour spots on India Street.

Desserts? - GET THE CHEESECAKE.

Dress? - In a place that uses real silver silverware, you should dress accordingly. Add a sweater to your jeans, or khakis to your shirt.

Kid-friendly? - Are they well-behaved? Do they eat vegetables?

Handicap accessible? - The restaurant, yes. The bathrooms, definitely too small.

Diner's tip: - Try the ribollita. There's a reason the place is named for it.

When we walked out of Ribollita last week, we were so full that breathing was a conscious effort.

I would have been satisfied with the heaping bowl of steamed mussels (\$8.25), especially after discovering that the broth, full of walnuts, was even better when we dipped our bread in it.

It probably didn't help that I kept sneaking spoonfuls of my friend's appetizer, the namesake ribollita (\$5.50), which is a hearty tomato broth stew of vegetables and white beans.

I was starting to feel full as I swallowed the last bite of my asparagus and ricotta ravioli (\$14.50).

But still, I snuck bites of the eggplant rollatini (\$13.95) on the other side of the table. My friend, who has been known to order and down two full meals in one sitting, had to ask for a box.

As we sat digesting, eyes glazed over with food and drink, I couldn't help but ask to hear the dessert menu. Torture, yes. But after food as good as what we'd just eaten, I couldn't resist.

As soon as she mentioned the cheesecake (\$5.95) — with a nut crust and pomegranate drizzle — I couldn't help myself. We ordered one to share. He ordered another one to go.

It was worth the pain. The cheesecake alone would win an award in my book. But add to that the nut crust, which has such a flavor and texture that graham could never achieve, and the tart-but-addictive drizzle ...

We fought over the last bite, and sat back, dazed, as we waited for the check.

But I should rewind, because it's not just the food that made this, hands down, the best dining experience I've had in Portland.

When we were first seated, a gray-haired couple was finishing up at a table nearby. As they got up to leave, they turned to us and started chatting, urging that we try the ribollita soup, the best the man had ever had, he said.

They seemed like proud parents more than just loving customers, and as they left, talking to the waitress as if she was family, I thought for a second they might be the owners.

No, said the waitress, they just come here a lot. The waitress, while she's on my mind, is what really made the evening.

As soon as she came to our table, ready to pour water and take our drink order, I knew we had chosen the right restaurant.

She was the most genuine waitress I've ever had — she wasn't just there to take our orders and head back to the kitchen, she smiled as if she'd known us for ages, was perfectly happy to make small conversation that wasn't small-talk and seemed always to understand what we needed.

It was her idea to dip bread in the mussel broth, and she was pleased to see that we ran out of bread twice. She helped choose a wine (Masciarelli Montepulciano d'Abruzzo, \$5.50) that paired well with my meal and my taste, and didn't scoff that I was asking for a red, rather than a white, to pair with seafood and delicately-flavored pasta.

named for it.

And she defended my friend's choice when I made fun of him for ordering the "expensive" beer, a \$10 bottle of Amaracord. It was good, as she said, twice the size of anything else and he had fun with the wire-and-cork stopper, which she left for him to open.

I've heard Ribollita described as having the best Italian food in town. Frankly, it could have been \$1 burgers and I'd still be raving about it, with its fantastic service and friendly atmosphere.

That the food was delicious was icing (or pomegranate drizzle) on the cake.

— Sarah Trent

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