

RESTAURANT REVIEW

Fired Up About Fra Diavolo

Elegant Setting, Superlative Food

BY CHARLES MARGANETTI

Just south of the University/Commercial intersection on the east side of the road is a restaurant that advertises its quality right on the marquee. The sign says Fra Diavolo with four large stars. That sign is an understatement in a marvelously understated masterpiece of an elegant restaurant.

Fra Diavolo is located at 5444 N. University Dr. in Lauderhill (954-746-3132). It is adorably decorated in what can only be described as a “very European motif,” subtle, warm and inviting so that customers linger for more than a little while.

It’s relatively small, seating roughly eighty people. That is what gives it the intimacy so sorely lacking in most South Florida eateries. Yet, the tables aren’t crowded close to each other to get as many customers as fire codes allow. The restaurant maintains balance and caters to the discerning palate. You would imagine, and with some obvious justification, that the restaurant would make up for the small number of seats with exorbitant prices. If you did, like me, you’d be absolutely wrong. The prices are embarrassingly low for what you receive.

It has been at the same location and under the same ownership for nineteen years. Carol Oliveros rarely takes credit for creating this eatery. She points to her partners and chefs and wait staff as the backbone of the operation. They are clearly critical for its success.

But let’s give credit where credit is due. Carol puts in seven-day weeks (even though the restaurant is closed on Mondays, Carol still has the cleaning, ordering, preparing, and shopping, among other tasks). The result of her care is a smoothly running, effortless-to-watch, perfection of an ultra-high quality dining experience – night in and night out.

Please believe me when I say that I am not searching for my favorite adjectives just to show off my command of the language. I am trying, with my limited ability, to get you all to try this place once on my say-so. You will become a customer.

To create the wonderful dishes takes time and Fra Diavolo lets its customers know from the outset, so that there is no misunderstanding. Menus state: “Every day at Fra Diavolo, meals are prepared fresh to order. It takes at



least 20 to 35 minutes to prepare your entree, so please be patient and enjoy some wine or select from our delicious antipasti.”

No South Florida hustle. No “get ‘em in, get ‘em out” attitude. It is just a plain and simple exquisite dining adventure revolving around the recipes of southern Italy, occasionally tempered with northern Italy variations.

I’ve told you about Carol, so let me mention her even more modest husband, Raul Oliveros. He has been cooking for South Florida diners for the past 28 years from Key West to Orlando. He learned the art of cooking by working with several professional European chefs in New York. He started as a dishwasher and worked himself up to a four-star chef. Raul liked the story of Fra Diavolo so much that he decided to name his restaurant after the legendary character (the story is reprinted on its web site: www.fradiavolorestaurant.com). Raul retired (likely exhausted) in 2003.

Finally and clearly not least, the third partner and now head chef is Diego Cruz, who has been cooking in South Florida since 1985. In 1999, after working for Raul at another location for eight years, Diego moved to Fra Diavolo. When Raul retired in 2003, Diego became the head chef.

Our waiter for the evening and, I may add, an extraordinary professional, was Alain. We had fun speaking French in this Italian fantasyland. In whatever language, the foods he served us transcended borders, cultures, apprehensions and all previous experiences. If you are a Barolo aficionado, Fra Diavolo has Fontanafredda, which is, to this critic,

the finest wine for this style anywhere in the world. While this is a more expensive wine, Fra Diavolo has wines for every taste and every price point.

We began with *cappe di funghi*, which are stuffed mushroom caps with seafood. They were decadent – sweet, moist, flavorful and almost impossible to stop eating. We followed these appetizers with yet more appetizers (why not?), including *clams casino* baked with pimento, capers, prosciutto and also *clams oregante*, which are baked in olive oil, oregano and bread crumbs. Another appetizer we devoured was *mozzarella caprese* for two, which is big enough for three or four.

I was “forced” to move on to our main courses and chose to experience genuine (as in NOT a patty) *veal forestiera*, which is prepared with baby artichoke hearts, mushrooms, lemon, butter and white wine sauce. We also had *veal sorrentina* served with eggplant, prosciutto, mozzarella, herbs, white wine, *demi-glace* sauce and a touch of *marinara*. Each of these magnificent dishes was the tenderest of tender veal selections, and while I always hope the baby cows were raised humanely, I review the dishes for my readers who have no objection. If readers have no objection, this is the veal for you.

If you regularly read this column, you know I don’t like chicken breast. In fact, I don’t like white meat in general. My guests sampled the *chicken cacciatore* prepared with mushrooms, tomatoes, peppers, onions and garlic.

How could I review Fra Diavolo and not sample shrimp Fra Diavolo? Here it is the sweetest, moistest shrimp available on the daily market and garnished with mussels and clams, basil, garlic, and *marinara* sauce, hot or mild. Certainly this dish is worthy to carry the restaurant’s name.

Lastly, DESSERT! Have each one — PLEASE.

Carol bakes everything on the premises and, if she wrote a dessert recipe book, it would be a best seller for decades to come. Do NOT miss dessert. The menu includes Carol’s whiskey cake, *cannoli*, *spumoni* and Italian cheesecake, among other offerings.

Fra Diavolo is my newest frequent Italian restaurant. It is sure to be yours as well. ◊