

# Sette Mezzo: Classic Italian in Coconut Creek

by Linda Brockman

It's a perfect hand in the Italian card game, *sette e mezzo*. It's also Chef Franco Filippone's inspiration for Sette Mezzo Ristorante in Coconut Creek. He describes the game – his restaurant's namesake – with excitement, explaining that it is similar to blackjack, but instead of 21, players are trying to get 7½, or “sette mezzo” in Italian.

His enthusiasm sums up the authenticity of the establishment – from the décor (thick cream-colored pillars separating parts of the main dining room), to the music (popular modern Italian singers, including Eros Ramazzotti), to, of course, the food. Diners are likely to find Franco's wife, Rita, taking care of the front of the house and chatting with guests, many of them regulars.



Saccatini pasta purses stuffed with pear and fontina cheese in a pink sauce.

Bello in Fort Lauderdale, said the food doesn't go out unless it's perfect.

Filippone was five years old when his Sicilian family left Palermo and moved to Rochester, NY, where his father owned an Italian restaurant. That's where the younger Filippone met Rita – whose family comes from Agrigento, Sicily – and the couple moved to South Florida in 2005.

He opened Sette Bello in Fort Lauderdale in 2008 – its name

being an homage to his father's restaurant. “Sette Bello,” which means seven of gold, is also a winning hand – this time in a different Italian card game called Scopa.

## Delicious choices

My friends and I ordered three house made appetizers: Cervelatta Sausage (not-too-spicy, stuffed sausage bites on a bed of sautéed peppers and onions); Beans and Greens (sautéed cannellini beans and escarole); and, Mozzarella Carozza, perfectly fried cheese squares complemented by a flavorful pomodoro sauce.

We tried Pappardelle con Pollo, Filippone's most popular chicken dish, served with flat noodles, garlic, oil, roasted tomatoes, lightly floured chicken, porcini mushrooms, and arugula. The porcini mushrooms make it distinctive, and the lightly floured chicken is fresh and tasty.

“America runs on chicken,” said Filippone, who uses only cage-free, hormone-free poultry. Popular dishes include Steak Pizzaiola, Chicken Parmesan, and Chicken Marsala.

My dining companion, Rachel – who watches what she eats – ordered a

The chef, who divides his time between Sette Mezzo and his first restaurant, the more upscale Sette



Chicken Milanese



Pappardelle Con Pollo is a very popular dish.

beautifully presented, grilled Chicken Milanese. A light and tasty choice, it is dotted with tiny cubes of mozzarella and finished with a balsamic glaze.

She admits, though, that her healthful selection was eclipsed by the Saccatini, adorable pasta purses stuffed with pears and fontina cheese and sitting contently in a pink sauce made from tomatoes and cream. “It was such a surprise to me – the pairing of pear and cheese was so good. I could not get enough of it,” Rachel said. “You can feel the chef's passion in the food.”

A large bowl of chopped salad, along with warm bread in a brown paper bag, is served at each table. “I wanted to go back to the times when we would buy fresh breads from the bakery, sold in bags,” said Filippone, whose daughters Sofia, 10, and Bianca, 14, often help at the restaurant. “So every table gets its own fresh baked loaf.”

Practically everything is made from scratch: gnocchi, ravioli, pizza dough, desserts, sauces, bread, dressings, sausages, and meatballs. Filippone buys local produce, and gets raw products – tomatoes, cheese, spaghetti, olive oil – from Italy. The meats and fish are wild-caught or locally raised, when possible.

Known for the filling in his cannolis, Filippone also makes other desserts: an Apple Fold, classic Tiramisu, gluten-free Chocolate Tortino, and a selection of gelatos and sorbets.

The crowning glory of our meal: a light Ricotta Cheesecake. “It is one of the best cheesecakes I've ever had,” said my foodie friend, Wendy. Not too heavy or sweet, it is a refreshing change from the standby New York-style cheesecake, and a source of pride for Filippone. “It took a long time to perfect. I made more than 20 cakes before I got it spot-on.”

The bar, tended by the cheerful Carlos, has a large selection of signature cocktails, fine wine, rare Scotch whisky, and specialty bourbon.



Ricotta Cheesecake



Bomba is a special dessert not on the menu.

## Authenticity in the Creek

Living in Coconut Creek, Filippone saw the need for authentic Italian in a neighborhood sprinkled with pizzerias and chain restaurants. Seventy percent of his clientele consists of families and couples from Parkland, but he also caters to Coral Springs and Margate.

The 2,600-square-foot restaurant includes a private room that seats up to 40 people. There is also seating outside.

On Sundays, Filippone offers Sunday Sauce, where diners can take a pot of sauce home, along with meatballs, sausage, and braciola (flattened, stuffed steak). There is also a family style menu that offers both value and the opportunity to explore Sette Mezzo's best selections. Four to 12 people can order two appetizers, two pastas, and two entrees – \$26.99 for adults and \$13.95 for kids.

Regulars Lonnie and Cheryl Buckner are glad to escape to Sette Mezzo for dinner or happy hour (5 to 7pm, Tuesday to Friday, Sunday) near their Regency Lakes home. They come in about twice a month. “Franco and Rita care about whether you like it or not – not that we've ever had a reason to complain,” said Cheryl, munching on a Focaccia appetizer and sipping on a Dolce Sette Mezzo signature cocktail, made with blueberry vodka, blueberries, lime juice, club soda, simple syrup, and garnished with a sprig of thyme. “It's homemade, fresh and not too expensive.”

*Sette Mezzo*  
Open Tues-Sun, 5 to 10pm  
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or visit [settemezzofla.com](http://settemezzofla.com)