

Top-end Italian

New owners have restyled a high-end cafe to a point where it is nudging the upper echelons of Italian cuisine.

THE Italian dining experience in Adelaide has taken on a life of its own, with plenty of solid, old-fashioned stops along the way – La Trattoria and Enzo's, for instance – numerous smart pasta cafes through to distinct regional expressions such as Ambrosini's, slick city purveyors like Georges on Waymouth, Pranzo and Enoteca, right up to the high arts of Chianti Classico and Assaggio.

Something for everyone, essentially. You pick the style and price brackets, and there's a pretty good chance you'll be well satisfied.

Italian cuisine is the most dominant in this food-fascinated city, now seeing the next generation of mid-20th century immigrant families at the helm of their own kitchens and providores.

Norwood and beyond into the northeastern suburbs has long been an epicentre, The Parade home to many classic eateries over the years, some into their third decade and often sticking to menus that have long served them well.

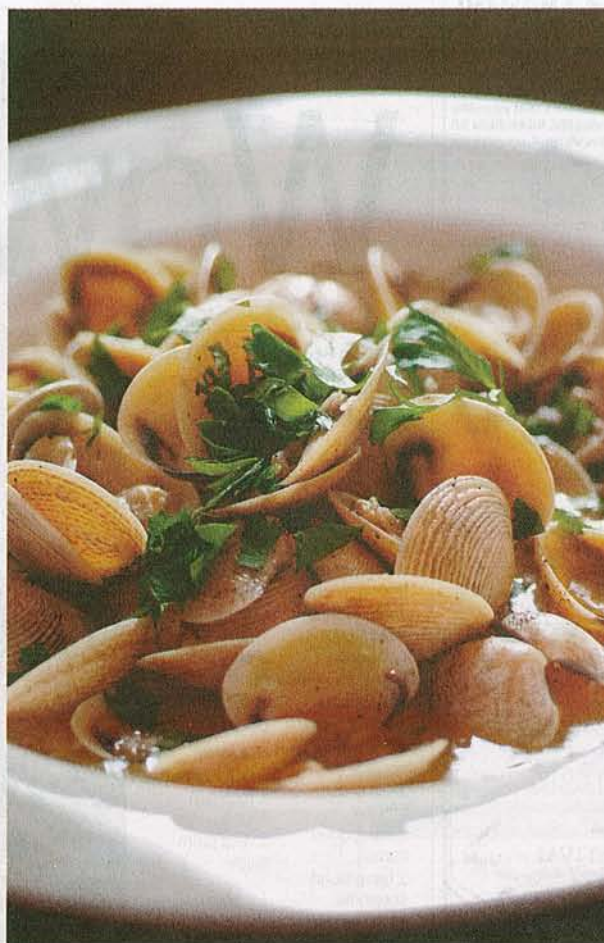
In the higher echelon, Martini Ristorante has morphed from a previous incarnation when it was called a cafe – though it was always more than that when owned by Tom Guidome up to two years ago.

Now, two chefs whose families originate from southern Italy and whose cooking reflects that, though not entirely, have taken on Martini. They have rebadged to Ristorante, stripped away its more gauche elements, like its former kitsch Hollywood posters, and turned it towards the keen and clever end of our modern Italian offerings.

Co-owners and chefs Larry Piscioneri and Domenic Martino are the *amici* behind the latest Martini era, the former not the same gent as the respected restaurant designer of the same name but a cook with years of experience at Rundle St's famed Da Clemente as well as Enzo's, where Domenic also manned the burners.

They have a fairly flexible little operation happening at this mini-shopping-arcade-based restaurant, with a main dining room decked out well, a kitchen dining area where a big table can sit big groups within sight of the chefs in action, as well as an atrium area under heating at this time of the year.

There is the catch of having to trek a bit to the facilities outside the arcade's rear doors, but that's a matter of practicalities and personal fitness rather



The bill

Antipasti: \$7-\$15

Entrees: \$14-\$16

Pasta: \$19-\$24

(main size)

Mains: \$24-\$32

Desserts: \$8-\$15

Vegetarian: Plenty to mix and match.

Wine list: Reasonable spread and decent bottle prices, though single glasses are exxy.

Corkage: \$15

Summary: Gently made-over Norwood Italian ristorante with a deal of style in the kitchen, though more attention at the tables would be appreciated.

Score: 14.5

Ratings – Below 10: Don't bother. 11: Barely passable. 12: Some interest. 13: Shows promise. 14: Good. 15: Recommended. 16: Really good. 17: Excellent. 18: Exceptional. Above 18: Fabulous dining experience. All restaurants are visited unannounced and meals paid for by *The Advertiser*.

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than lack of attention on the part of the proprietors. There always has been a quirk of trading on the venue's name via the bar: martinis and cocktails highlighted on the wine list. That remains, along with a pretty decent vinous collection too, well set out, covering all styles including imported Italian whites and reds and a decent collection of cellared bottles up to a decade-old Hill of Grace nudging just over \$500. Bottle prices are generally reasonable, though the two dozen or so single-glass choices are comparatively pricey in the \$7.50-\$10 range.

Getting a drink, by the way, seemed a little arduous as a waiter relayed between a few tables, ours perhaps in a blind spot on his direct route to the kitchen. Attention during the whole meal was cursory, a study in the art of racing in blinkers. For the record, we got to the finish line in the end.

And we ate fairly well, the menu starting with antipasti titbits, a collection of well-versed entrees and, for more solid appetites, pasta including pappardelle with duck and mushroom ragu that has been a house favourite for quite some time.

Steamed cockles are simplicity and freshness personified, but there is a surfeit of garlic in the white wine broth, so take care if there are plans later for close encounters.

Char-grilled quail has been marinated perfectly, so it's moist in a just-sweet sauce based on grappa and a touch of chilli over warm radicchio leaves. Damned good. Not so a vegetarian entree of grilled cheese with roasted and grilled vegetables – it's basically a dish of cheese-on-toast kind of flavours. Saltimbocca has all the makings but comes in a bowl with arguably too much going on beyond its core veal, prosciutto and sage harmonies – read cannellini beans, drenched in a little too much sauce and maybe just a bit too busy all up.

Salt and pepper squid with the ubiquitous pear, rocket and parmesan salad is up there with the best of its genre you'll ever find, with good body in the flesh, sparse coating and impressively presented.

An osso buco special is suitably rich and aromatically balanced with gremolata topping – pencil it in for a cold night.

Desserts are often a moment for pause in Italian dining rooms, here touching the usual tiramisu to affogato bases. A hazelnut and chocolate panna cotta with frangelico anglaise registers all its promised flavours, though texturally it seems a little more flummery-like than creamy.

Almond nougat semifreddo, however, balances neatly between chewy and ice-creamy, with a great blood orange syrup for tartness and a bright foil.

There's a deal of good stuff happening here, though occasional inconsistencies from the stoves and on the floor can slow the whole experience. Still, Martini shows it is nudging at the heels of several of the city's more favoured Italian restaurants. We should be so lucky.

Martini Ristorante

59a The Parade,
Norwood.

Phone 8362 7822.

Lunch: Noon-4pm,
Mon-Fri.

Dinner: 6pm-late,
Mon-Sat.

Seating: 70 inside;
60, atrium. Functions
available Sundays.

**Wheelchair access
and facilities:** Yes.

Owners and chefs:
Larry Piscioneri and
Domenic Martino, below.

Right, steamed cockles.

Pictures: GRANT NOWELL

