

DINING OUT



You'll see what all the noise is about at Teatro

Dining/by Mat Schaffer

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Teatro. 177 Tremont St., Boston (Theater District); 617-778-6841;
www.teatroboston.com.

★★★☆☆

What's the hallmark of a successful restaurant? Noise. The clamor of conversation means buzz on the street. The din of discussion is ka-ching at the cash register. Walk into any eatery in town and listen. If you hear silence, you hear a business in trouble.

At Teatro, the noise level is deafening. Jamie Mammano's new Theater District restaurant revels in its megadecibel boisterousness. It thumbs its nose at anyone stodgy enough to complain about the racket. At Teatro, it's a party every night. And given the state of the world these days, who'd turn down an opportunity to party?

Not at these prices. Mammano - the one-time executive chef at the Four Seasons, Boston, who opened the perennially popular Mistral - isn't known for thrifty dining. But at Teatro, where former Mistral sous chef Robert Jean runs the show, nothing costs more than \$22. Don't expect fussy, fancified service or lengthy meals; Teatro is a casual eating experience. The wait staff is vigilant but approachable. And you'll be in and out in less than two hours - the better to catch a show at a neighboring *teatro* (theater).

What's for dinner? Chef Jean celebrates Northern Italy with simple, hearty dishes big on flavor and low on pretension. An old favorite, steamed mussels (\$10), finds renewed personality with smoked tomatoes, pesto and the kick of red pepper flakes. Crispy calamari (\$11) needs little more than a sprinkling of lemon zest and a ramekin of lemon aioli. If only the tricolore salad (\$9) - a festive-looking plate of endive, radicchio, curly leaf lettuce and crumbled gorgonzola - wasn't drowning in sugary chardonnay-honey vinaigrette.

There are two grilled pizzas (\$12), similar to those on the menu at Mistral but with thicker crust. A spritz of coarse sea salt turns white cheese pizza - covered with melted *bel paese*, mascarpone and romano cheeses and strewn with pickled pepperoncini and arugula - into something heavenly. The cherry tomato pie garnished with fresh mozzarella and oregano is equally delectable - crisp and confident.

Choose from an assortment of pastas. I'd be happy chowing down on rigatoni with "classic" ragu Bolognese (\$17) every night. The long-simmered veal, pork and beef sauce is everything one desires in a Bolognese - thick and meaty with the barest kiss of sweetness. Braised oxtail cannelloni (\$20) in root vegetable-thyme-red wine sauce is so overwhelmingly rich it could paralyze your pacemaker. I prefer the minimalism of a bowl of tagliolini tossed with plump Gulf shrimp, grape tomatoes and slivered garlic (\$19). It's altogether lovely.

Talk about bang for your buck. For \$22, you'll feast on slow-cooked pork shank the size of a welterweight's fist, in Marsala and thyme gravy with beet greens and mashed yams. The pork falls off the bone. Veal saltimbocca (\$22) "leaps in the mouth," as its name implies, thanks to prosciutto, sage, sauteed wild mushrooms and creamed spinach that would make a steakhouse envious. I sneaked several forkfuls of spinach to accessorize my minute steak - a 5-ounce tenderloin, pounded thin - with papas fritti (\$21). A good steak frites is a good steak frites, no matter what language describes it.



RESTAURANT & BAR

The small wine list features a bottle for every pocketbook. A 2000 Travanto Montepulciano (\$23) is young, edgy and cherry-choice with the cannelloni and pork. You'll appreciate the blueberry spice of a '00 Cusumano "Nadaria" Syrah (\$23) with the saltimbocca and steak.

If you want dessert, go elsewhere (and free up your table for the horde of waiting patrons, if you please). There's gelato and sorbets (\$8) and ultrarummy rum cake (\$7), baked daily at Mistral. It's forgettably mundane.

The building (once home to Galleria Italiana) used to be a synagogue. The original Traventine walls and art nouveau ceiling are beautiful. They've installed a bar in the front and open kitchen in the rear. The neonesque lighting will have you feeling as if you're in a fishbowl, and in a way, given the intensity of the people-watching, you are. (Wednesday night I counted four food critics in the house - and management ID'ed us all.)

Teatro is loud. There's not a swatch of fabric in the entire place - other than the linen napkins - to absorb sound. So what? At Teatro, noise equals fun and fun equals success. If that's a problem, bring earplugs.

Hours: Mon.-Sat., 5 p.m.-midnight; Sun., 4-11 p.m. Bar open until 1 a.m.

Bar: Full

Credit: All

Accessibility: Accessible

Parking: Nearby lots