Encore!
Mistral chef/owner Jamie Mammano does it again with his exquisite Italian eatery, Teatro

By J. CHARLES MOKRISKI • Photographs by BERTA A. DANIELS

When I walked into Teatro, I could not believe my eyes. The low, drop ceiling that had been in place when this space housed Galateria Italiana was gone, revealing a magnificent, high vaulted ceiling. Decorated with gold-painted swirls, wreaths and urns above a similarly decorated frieze, the ceiling now has a classical look. In a shrewd setting, one would not be surprised to see toga-clad senators seated at the bar.

Blue light emanates from just below the vaulting to further the ceiling and frieze in a cool glow. Textured marble walls, glossy black granite tables, modern chairs with cushioned seats and upholstered banquettes suggest style, if not elegance. An imposing, high-arched window frames a view across Tremont Street to the southeastern corner of Boston Common. The room has an aura of refinement, even majesty, as befits its history as a former synagogue.

Particularly eye-catching are the stainless-steel spiral chandeliers over the bar, from which hang crystal pendants of varying sizes and shapes. I was charmed and delighted by many small touches, like the substantial pewter salt shaker and pepper mill; a small rectangular dish with two wells, one for butter and another for extra-virgin olive oil; thick, absorbent white cotton napkins; and sleek white dinnerware, including an elongated oval platter—pointed rather like a surfboard—that is used for serving an elaborate antipasto for two. Although the noise level is high, a function of the unrelentingly hard surfaces of bare tables, marble walls and tile floor, it does not grate but rather evokes the vitality of the place.

Teatro’s prices are surprisingly reasonable, particularly for a chic downtown eatery. Appetizers were priced from $7 to $12, while pastas and main courses ranged from the mid-teens to $21. An incomparable starter was a classic Caesar salad ($7). Tender, impeccably crisp inner leaves of fresh romaine lettuce were dressed in a creamy mustard-laced vinaigrette, enlivened with a combination of garlic, anchovies, thin shavings of Parmesan and crunchy house-made croutons. White cheese pizzas with hot peppers and coarse sea salt ($12) consisted of an ultra-thin, crispy crust with even thinner slices of green chile and tomatoes, a coating of Bel Paese, Romano, mascarpone and Parmesan cheeses and a harvest of fresh arugula leaves. The combination of tastes and textures of the cheeses alone—salty, sweet, mellow, sharp, creamy, grainy—made the offering particularly memorable.

One evening, we ordered the grilled Atlantic salmon with cracked-mustard glaze and broccoli rabe ($20) to share as a fish course. The thick fillet of boneless salmon had been divided and put on plates in the kitchen, a gracious gesture that distinguishes the patron-friendly from the run-of-the-mill restaurant. It was grilled in a perfect texture, with the moist, flavorful fish just slightly red, and the sweet, savory mustard glaze offsetting the fish’s fatty richness. An accompaniment of small, slightly flattened baked potatoes redolent of rosemary along with garlic broccoli rabe, made

Teatro
177 Tremont St., Boston
(778-6841)
HOURS Mon.-Sat. 5pm-12am;
Sun. 4-11pm
RESERVATIONs parties of five
or more
CREDIT CARDS all major
HANDICAPPED accessible by
parking on-street
LIQUOR LICENSE full bar

Teatro’s antipasto for two includes bruschetta with roasted peppers and white anchovies, prosciutto di Parma, capocollo ham, white bean puree, sweet eggplant caponata and pecorino polenta.

Moving on to true secondi, or Italian main courses, I found the char-grilled game hen with garlic, lemon and herb butter ($17) terrific. This small bird had been marinated with herb-infused olive oil, grilled to a golden-brown turn, and then split and spayed across a mashed-potato base that shared the olive oil and
garlic flavors of the marinade, with broad-leafed Italian parsley scattered on top. Roasted or grilled poultry is a good test of a kitchen's ability to turn our simple things well and to make the ordinary taste special. Teatro's game hen was indeed an audience pleaser.

Finally, veal saltimbocca, a combination of tender veal cutlet sauteed and layered with prosciutto, sage, wild mushrooms, and Parmesan cheese, may not have jumped off the plate toward our mouths—despite the literal meaning of its name—but the combination of tastes and textures made it a sensory delight. It was a shame that an exquisite portion of creamed spinach lay hiding beneath the veal. It deserved more billing, or at least a bit more recognition than it got.

Teatro's wine list was a delight. Predominantly Italian, with a few California selections thrown in as understudies, the wines are well chosen and reasonably priced. No fewer than 18 wines are offered by the glass and 13—ounce carafe. Few upscale restaurants in Boston offer wine for $6 a glass, but Teatro has seven of them. We enjoyed the Montepulciano Trecanato from Abruzzi one evening, a fruity yet well-structured red that went particularly well with the pasta ($6 glass; $12 carafe). Another offering at the same price, the Sangiovese DiMajo Norante from Italy's midboot Molise province (next door to Abruzzi), was bigger and fuller, with good acid to balance its forward fruit.

Service at Teatro was inexperienced but earnest. I did see waitpersons clearing the plate of a neighboring diner while her companion was in midbite—a service shortcoming that seems almost universal in American restaurants, where there seems to be a compulsion to whisk empty plates away the moment a fork is laid to rest. In other respects, service enhancements nearly compensated for this lack of finesse. Tableware was replaced frequently, water glasses filled, and olive oil replenished along with incomparably crusty Tuscan loaves from Cambridge's Hi-Rise Bread Co.

Teatro, a spectacular addition to the Theater District, is already playing to rave reviews as it nourishes pre-theater and post-theater throngs. Its high style and star-quality cuisine belie its low-budget production. It's clearly destined for a long and successful run.