Eager anticipation among Boston dining aficionados followed the news that Jamie Mammano and his Mistral/Teatro team would take over the space vacated by Salamander at the west end of Copley Square. Salamander, a hip spot created by accomplished restaurateur Stan Frankenthaler, arrived with similar hype and promise five years ago but failed to take off, quietly closing after a few sluggish years. Mammano and company have wholly made over the space, opening it up into one large, impressive dining room separated from a lively 15-seat bar by a white and black slate screen.

The room is stunning, with five massive white columns and large white rectangular and trapezoidal baffles mounted just below a black ceiling, on which are mounted small track spotlights. An oversized photograph of what appears to be a French garden, intentionally out of focus to suggest an impressionist painting, draws the eye, as do long, sleek, white leather banquettes that are arranged not just along its periphery but throughout the dining room, with the result that the room does not appear as cavernous as its 125 seats would suggest. This restaurant may be the "little sister" (its name literally translated from the Italian) of Mistral, but it's far from little or insignificant in terms of visual impact and general ambiance. More important, Sorellina's cuisine, while lacking the polish and refinement of big sister Mistral, provides good, honest Italian fare with vibrant, robust flavors evocative of the Mediterranean.

My first visit to Sorellina took place on a Saturday evening. I was lucky enough to snag a single seat at the bar just before 7 p.m., and April, a bartender whose engaging, attentive manner did not detract from her efficiency, provided superb service from the beginning to the end of my meal, despite a whirl of activity around and about her, unflappable even when patrons swelled to three deep in front of the bar. In between mixing cocktails and serving drinks to the throng, she lent informed guidance in navigating Sorellina's menu as she set my place with an attractive placemat, oversized, absorbent white napkin, substantial, elegantly curved Wedgewood tableware, and a basket containing a snugly loaf of superb, hard-crusted ciabatta bread and softened Vermont butter.

The bar ambiance put me in the mood for pasta, and the macaroncelli ($13) hit the spot. Two light, moist, flavorful meatballs, each topped by an ultra-thin slice of pleasantly salty cheese, accompanied long, hollow tubes of al dente pasta dressed with a light tomato and red wine sauce. While the menu described the meatballs as "American Kobe beef" (there is a trademark issue here somewhere), they seemed too delicate and complex to be pure beef, and absent the menu description I would have taken them as a mixture of beef, pork and veal. The menu identified the red wine in the sauce as Barolo, northern Italy's most famous wine, and the cheese as pecorino Toscano. The welter of disparate geographic references (Kobe, Barolo, and Toscano) did not detract from the triumph of the dish.

On a subsequent visit, I returned to the menu's abbreviated pasta section for the half-order of cuscini ($12), rectangular pasta "pillows" filled with veal, beef, pork, mascarpone cheese, tomatoes and cream—a classic Bolognese sauce—rendered at once robust and distinctive by the full, rich flavor of the roasted tomatoes. From the appetizers, I chose the whole grilled shrimp ($18), served in a round, cast iron skillet, a classy presentation replicated with other dishes as well. Their preparation was "arrabiata," literally "angry," an adjective used to describe the provocative, peppery sauce. In fact, they looked angry as well, their shells intact. Fortunately, careful cooking preserved the firm texture of the shrimp, making them easy to extract from the shells. The sweet, savory flavor of roasted tomatoes modulated the fiery spiciness of the sauce. Equally savory, the fonduta Valle d'Aosta ($14) showcased a specialty of northwestern Italy's Alpine frontier, melted fontina cheese, served in a cast iron...
“hunter style” sauce, a literal translation of the Italian term usually applied to this dish, “cacciatori,” overflowed with tomatoes, olives, garlic and mushrooms. Its robust flavor compensated for the substandard texture of the chicken, which even more than the monkfish suffered from overcooking. On the same page with its main course, Sorellina offered a number of contorni, or sides, from which we chose cauliflower al forno ($8), almost an entire head of cauliflower roasted in one of the restaurant's signature cast iron casseroles, braised with butter and milk, garnished with parmesan cheese and parsley, and seasoned with herbs to produce a special treat.

Sorellina's wine list, while tending to Back Bay prices (high), did have a couple of value-priced options: a Montepulciano d'Abruzzi ($7 a glass) combined fruity, pleasant flavor with decent structure and good acidity, with a nice clean finish. The least expensive bottle of red wine on the list, a 2003 Chenas by Potel Aviron ($32), turned out to be a superb, food-friendly choice. Its significant but slightly softened tannins proved that Beaujolais need not be the simple quaff that most people associate with the newly bottled Nouveau of late November. It demonstrated the heights to which the lowly gamay grape can ascend, particularly in wines from Chenas and other of Beaujolais' name communes, which can produce wines of sophistication and merit.

Sorellina's desserts included a chocolate torta ($10) that combined moist cake and a chocolate-Marsala zabaglione. The distinctive tart-sweet cherries provided a pleasant counterpoint to the creamy rich chocolate and custard. Limoncello-tiramisu ($10) substituted limoncello liqueur for the espresso coffee in which lady fingers are usually soaked in creating tiramisu. The result, a light and lively dessert, studded with whole kumquats, proved a perfect, palate-pleasing punctuation mark to conclude the meal. Unfortunately, the ultrasmall portion disappeared in a nanosecond.

Service throughout my two visits to Sorellina was uniformly excellent: attentive, efficient, informed and friendly. Aside from the texture lapses in the monkfish and more seriously in the chicken, this exciting new venue delivered unalloyed dining pleasure. Sorellina will clearly assume a prominent place among its siblings as a dining destination in the city. In fact, when the good weather finally comes, I can see Mammone enthusiasts trekking in a moveable feast from drinks and appetizers at Teatro through fagioli and bottarga at Mistral to a bowl of memorable pasta followed by a tiny taste of limoncello tiramisu at Sorellina.

Moving on to main courses, the monkfish "piccata style" ($28) brought a real treat. Monkfish, at one time disfavored this side of the Atlantic as a "junk fish," due perhaps to its ugly appearance, has become a staple at area restaurants. Sorellina's monkfish turned out to be not only huge in size—it almost filled a large, oval, cast iron casserole—but huge in flavor as well. Surrounding the fish were a medley of Mediterranean vegetables, including velvety red and yellow peppers, onions, eggplant, crunchy strips of green chilies, capers, olives and more of the rich, roasted tomatoes that distinguished so many of Sorellina's offerings. So delicious was the ensemble that it tempted me to overlook the monkfish's texture—normally this fish has firm and resilient flesh, which is why it's sometimes called "mock lobster"—which seemed a trifle soft, perhaps from too long a sojourn in the oven. Texture notwithstanding, not a morsel of the fish, nor a shred of the vegetables, nor a drop of the sauce survived the gusto with which I devoured this delicious dish.

The Niman ranch pork chop ($33) came with a small casserole of white Tuscan beans and breadcrumbs. The chop, at least an inch and a half thick, boasted impeccable texture; it was rare, tender and juicy, but the excessive sweetness of the "ried fruit mostarda" detracted from the dish. The toothsome and satisfying bean casserole, on the other hand, overshadowed this failing, constituting a kind of mini-cassoulet. Finally, the free-range roasted chicken "hunter style" ($26) yielded an entire half chicken, again roasted in a cast iron casserole. The