

Sorellina spares no expense, and the food is priceless

By Wesley Morris, February 17, 2006

Calling Sorellina, the up-market Italian place that just opened in Copley Square, a "designer" restaurant sounds like a write-off. But it's not. Sorellina occupies the first address on Huntington Avenue, perched in the same spot that used to belong to the dearly departed Salamander. The dining room is vast, and the ceilings are in the troposphere. The chairs cost an alleged \$900 apiece, something only a designer keister would notice.

Even if the reported price of the furniture is half right, it speaks volumes about the expenses that weren't spared to turn Sorellina into a chic playground for the corporate-card demographic. Everything is top of the line. On the largest wall, there's a massive light box with a stark black-and-white image of a manicured garden. It has a gothic quality that says the Brontës and the Cure, in unison. Apparently, it's a replication of the icon on the business card from Mistral. Same owners. Similar clientele. On any night at Sorellina, you can spy old money sitting in the waiting area with new money who's eager to spend it.

They've come to the right place. There's really no price you can put on the tuna tartare (even if the menu lists it at a whopping \$18). Served as a block built with mustard, fruit, and a "secret ingredient," it's a slab of raw ambrosia. The yellowtail crudo is citrusy and intensely buttery, and a Caesar-like salad bills itself simply as "romaine" but incorporates anchovies into the dressing.

Elsewhere, chef John Delpha has shown traditional Italian cooking the door. Sure, the maccheroncelli is just pasta with meatballs. But the firm tubes of pasta are hearty enough to make you roll your eyes at whatever you dump out of the box and boil at home. They encircle meatballs made from Kobe beef in rich, flavorful gravy. Truffled fries are exactly what they sound like, and if the idea of french fries in truffle oil doesn't appeal, it should -- in the guiltiest way. Equally criminal are the pasta pillows stuffed with a downy Bolognese.

If Delpha wanted, he could follow current dining trends and serve tapas-style portions. But he's his own man (those pasta pillows are cinnamon-dusted!), so there are entrées, too. The generous monkfish piccata is deep, tart, and pleasantly pungent. It's a perfectly cooked version of the so-called "poor man's lobster." And the veal -- oh, the veal! It's served Milanese-style, but rather than pounded thin, it's done as a thicker, bone-handled chop, crispy and herb-crusting outside with a moist, rosy interior. As one diner exclaimed, it's a "big honkin' piece of meat!"

The grilled pork chop, accompanied by a light stew of sausage and Tuscan beans, comes smothered in the dried-fruit-and-homemade-mustard confection that makes that tuna tartare so good. The flavor is kaleidoscopic: savory, salty, sweet. The temptation is to eat it all. Of course, not all of it will fit most tummies. And so a Sorellina doggie bag becomes man's best friend.

It's easy to spot the people who haven't yet had the pleasure of eating here. They're at the bar

Sorellina

★★★

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Location: 1 Huntington Avenue, Back Bay / Boston; 617-412-4600

Cuisine: Italian

Prices: First courses \$11-\$18. Pasta \$13-\$26. Second courses \$26-\$40. Desserts \$9-\$12.

Credit Cards: All major cards.

Handicap access: Fully accessible.

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not putting food in their mouths. On a recent Thursday night, the bar was crowded with nerds, businesspeople, and the suggestively dressed women that men drool over. Amid the commotion, one lady decided enough was enough and proceeded to take her evening to the next level. Her date was a youthful, leisurely attired silver fox. His shirt was opened to his abdomen, and the lady, it seemed, was feeling frisky and famished. From her stool, she burrowed her head in his chest and nuzzled it, stopping occasionally to graze. Her move was somewhere between first base and second. Regardless, she obviously hadn't tried a thing on the menu. Anything on it would cure her of having to live (and love) this way.