



## Dining, Food & Wine

By Corby Kummer

The first time I walked into Sorellina, I walked back out within 15 minutes. The crowd at the bar was three deep, and, as for tables—forget it. The diners, the people eating at the bar, the people lined up having drinks while waiting for their tables—everyone looked as pleased with themselves as they looked prosperous.

When I later called back with even a bit of advance notice, I was given reservations quickly and graciously. Sorellina is a polished machine built by a group that knows its business. Jamie Mammano, the chef-owner, is a thoroughgoing professional who made his local reputation long ago at Aujourd'hui and created in Mistral a stylish, adult, urban restaurant. Even if Mammano isn't quite a household word in Boston, he and Paul Roiff, the real estate developer and his business partner, have built a tidy, well-functioning empire that includes the sleek, thriving, noisy, casual Teatro. Recently Mammano also became supervising chef at Roiff's Federalist, the boutique hotel that has successfully projected pomp and power along with style.

As at the Fed, as soon as you go into Sorellina, you stand up straighter and feel like you could add your voice to the unspoken chorus saying, "We run things around here—got a problem with that?" The dramatically high walls are a deep chestnut, and almost the only decorative accents are big iron chandeliers and floor-to-ceiling beige curtains with black diamond stitching. Sorellina means "little sister," but in size, opulence, and ambition, Sorellina is nobody's kid sister.

Impressive in its monolithic way as Sorellina is, I can't help missing its predecessor, the equally opulent but much more alluring Salamander, which opened along with the flatiron Trinity Place. Salamander was chef-owner Stan Frankenthaler's bid for the Boston big-time. But the building turned out to be a problem location for him, and the food a bit too exotic for the owners of the condos upstairs. And perhaps Frankenthaler—who is now executive chef at Dunkin' Donuts—didn't get the power-broker vibe of the building, which Mammano and Roiff understand perfectly.

The menu at Sorellina won't challenge anyone, with the exception of the tripe appetizer. The fare is mainstream Italian with power-broker steakhouse touches, executed with smooth confidence. Unless you count the almost solid salt in one pasta dish, practically nothing you eat at Sorellina will last in memory. The bill, though, might.

The accent of the menu is Italian, but that really is just an accent. While many of the ingredients are Italian, the techniques are often French. Indeed, the menu is reminiscent of the French-leaning Mistral in its simplicity and luxe, though few of the dishes have the focus or sure sense of place I remember there. Sorellina's executive chef, John Delpha, was the opening sous-chef at Mistral. There and, especially, at Harvest, where he was later executive chef, Delpha turned out plush, undemanding dishes, and that's what you'll get at Sorellina.

The ingredients are top-notch. The yellowtail in a crudo appetizer and the tuna in a tartare appetizer were impeccable: The yellowtail was mostly left in its pristine beauty, with a light, blood-orange vinaigrette and crushed cherry peppers for an undistracting accent. The tartare was more baroque, with hot notes from chili vinegar and mustard seed and unexpected (I'd say unnecessary) richness from mayonnaise. Grilled shrimp with real flavor (the shrimp-cocktail

specimens around town might as well be surimi) was served over an *arrabbiata* tomato sauce with diced *guanciale* (cured pork cheek), burnt garlic, and chili flakes cooked long enough to be subtly warm rather than fiery. Similarly, I could taste the sweet Jonah crabmeat in the arancini, the croquettes of leftover risotto that have become a popular from-scratch menu item. These had the unexpected, and again I'd say unnecessary (and certainly un-Italian), richness of whipped cream folded into the risotto before the breading.

All fine, all fresh, all expert. But look at the prices: \$16 for the crudo, \$18 for the tuna and the shrimp, \$15 for the arancini. Even a salad with Gorgonzola and (very good) lardons is \$12. And I'll stop you if you think you can make a reasonably priced meal of these appetizers—the portions are fine, with the square of tuna especially generous, but not big enough for dinner.

Pastas offer a way around the price problem, with half portions available for \$12 or \$13. But they do in fact look like half portions. I was disappointed to find less of the strongly Italian focus I remember from Teatro pastas. Still, the cappellini's solid-salt sauce of *baccalà* (salt cod), tomatoes, olive oil, anchovy paste, and sea salt pleased salt-lovers at my table. (\$12 per half portion, \$22 per full).

Main courses are big and reliable, with prices to match. I was most impressed with whole roasted bronzini (\$31), the European sea bass also called *bronzino*. Delpha told me it was farm-raised in Greece and, of all places, the United Arab Emirates, giving rise to visions of a peaceable new kind of international trade. Served simply on a bed of sweated onions and fennel (with seasoned salt and a bit too much of it), the fish was sweet, meaty, terrific. Entrées of cod with leeks, gold potatoes, and lemon and farmed salmon with pancetta, chickpeas, and tarragon butter (both \$29) were similarly assured and distinctive, though monkfish with a Mediterranean vegetable *ragu* (\$28) was rubbery and curiously low on flavor (but salty!). The 15 ounces of Angus rib-eye indeed looked like a full pound of meat (\$38), with good flavor and even better grill work.

The wines are surprisingly reasonable, with a nicely tailored list with interesting American and Italian picks. Desserts, by Shane Grey, pastry chef for all Mammano's restaurants, are hit and miss; the two opening hits are fresh-fried cannoli shells (underfried and a bit greasy) with a first-rate filling made of local ricotta and clementine marmalade, and a mocha meringue cake that looks like a Cubist sculpture, with little globes of mocha sabayon between thick dead-white meringue layers (both \$9). The 1930s Italian look of the meringue confection seems of a piece with the opulent, restrained design and the deferential service. Sorellina is a good place to feel (and be) rich.

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