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## Open-hearth Gio takes 'old world' in new directions

By Susan Gottshall Special to The Morning Call

Not so long ago, the new strip mall that Gio Italian Grill calls home was a field. Considering this eatery's sophisticated spirit, it's especially ironic -- this stretch of Route 100 didn't even have a traffic light two decades ago.

But along with the development that has forever changed the landscape of Lower Macungie Township, there was bound to come a restaurant that kicked things up a notch in this formerly bucolic part of Lehigh County.

That restaurant would be Gio. This is not your everyday neighborhood pizzeria, even though it does dish up a darn good pie.

Everything about the eatery is sleek and chic: the minimalist decor, the classy black menus, and the fare, too, built on imported ingredients. What really counts, though, is the food, and Gio is right on the money in that category.

Having opened just before Easter, the upscale eatery has a palpable, shiny sense of newness that feels like the excitement of a car fresh from the showroom floor. A bit of one-size-fits-all sameness is inherent in its strip mall location -- here and there, tasteful wrought-iron embellishments add points of interest to an otherwise unremarkable, neutral decor.

There may have been a method in the madness, however, considering that the restaurant's focal point is its Woodstone or "open flame" hearth, which bakes some mighty fine pizza at some mighty high temperatures (600 degrees).

It's this oven that brings an "old world style" of Italian cooking to Gio, a venture of Tony and Giovanna DiMaio, both born to Sicilian parents and both involved in family restaurants. Gio is a realization of their joint dream, pursued all the way to Italy, where Tony cooked at a historic restaurant in Palermo, Sicily, and Giovanna sought out quality ingredients.

But Gio spins a "progressive twist," too. Take "cipolla" pizza, for example: This pie may be prepared and baked "old world style," but its toppings -- Brie cheese and caramelized onions -- are firmly rooted in the 21st century.

Other selections show the progressive side of the restaurant's spirit: grilled shrimp skewers with lemon celery salad; grilled salmon with sauteed spinach and balsamic glaze, and steamed mussels in pancetta (bacon) and Peroni (Italian beer) broth.

Gio takes an intelligent approach to the de rigueur Italian classics -- patrons choose chicken breast or veal scaloppini, and then select a preparation, such as Marsala, parmigiana or saltimbocca.

The restaurant also offers pasta classics such as penne vodka, eggplant parmigiana, spaghetti and "Nonna's meatballs," and lasagna of the day.

Seared tuna proved to be a fine starting point for a recent dinner at Gio. From a minute or so of cooking, the sashimi-grade fish had an almost imperceptible ring of white around the edges, but for the most part, the deep red filets were rare, tender and tasted of the sea. Orange slices topped the fish, adding such fine contrast I was disappointed there weren't more.

Rather simple salads -- romaine, tomato and red onion -- were dressed with light lemon vinaigrette, a welcome change of pace from ubiquitous balsamic vinaigrette. The dressing's clear citrus sense thankfully kept focus on the salad's elements, rather than itself. Gio's bread, wonderfully crusty outside, was light and feathery inside.

Sweet tomato glazed pork loin, perched atop roasted garlic mashed potatoes, tasted as good as it looked, even though the meat was just a touch dry. The mashed potatoes provided comfort of the highest order; a side of broccoli rabe was excellent. An evening special -- moist striped bass in tomato, olive and garlic broth -- was gently layered with flavor.

So intriguing was Gio's open-flame hearth that its thin-crust pizzas begged sampling. In two additional visits, I met the challenge with "Mediterraneo" (artichokes, olives, pine nuts, tomato, roasted garlic and roasted red peppers) and "Campania" (goat cheese, pear and arugula).

Both were excellent, but the latter was a particular favorite -- elegant in appearance, with almost paper-thin slices of pear, and in taste, with the pepper greens and tart cheese playing against the fruit's sweetness.

Gio's desserts, made in the restaurant's kitchen, tempted with lemon panna cotta and zabaglione, but I opted to share the uncommon Nutella pizza for two. So good and so simple, I had to wonder why I never thought of spreading the luscious chocolate hazelnut spread on top of dough and baking it. A perfect garnish of fresh red raspberries added color, flavor and textural interest, and balance to this warm and wonderful happy ending.

#### **THE DETAILS: GIO ITALIAN GRILL**

6465 Village Lane, Macungie

610-966-9446

<http://www.gioitaliangrill.com>

Hours: 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday through Saturday

Prices: Ap petizers: \$2.95-\$12.95; pizza and sandwiches: \$7.95-\$13.95; entrees: \$11.95- \$25.95; dessert: \$2.95-\$9.95

Credit cards: American Express, Discover, MasterCard, Visa

Bar: Full bar

Smoking: Non smoking

Accessibility: Entry and rest rooms wheelchair accessible

*Susan Gottshall is a freelance restaurant reviewer for Go Guide. Gottshall, who tells it like it is, attempts to remain anonymous during restaurant visits. All meals are paid for by The Morning Call.*

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