

Open-hearth Gio takes "old world" in new directions

May 17, 2007|By Susan Gottshall Special to The Morning Call - Freelance

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.

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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.

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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610-820-6704

THE DETAILS

GIO ITALIAN GRILL

6465 Village Lane, Macungie

610-966-9446

www.gioitaliangrill.com

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

Prices: Appetizers: \$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

