

Macungie's neo Gio a piping hot hit

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GIO ITALIAN GRILL

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Whenever the hunt begins for another restaurant to review, I look to Kurt Blumenau's "Retail Watch" column in The Morning Call, harass friends for suggestions and scour the yellow pages. But because of the overabundance of certain cuisines, I feel like I'm frequently saying, "Please, not another pierogie, hot dog or Italian joint."

Thankfully, I did take a friend's advice and went to Gio Italian Grill, a fairly new restaurant in Macungie that isn't just another Italian joint.

Started by Tony and Giovanna DiMaio, both raised by Sicilian parents, this welcome addition to the L.V. foodie scene successfully translates traditional Italian dishes into modern and hip meal.

The mood

With minimal decorations, Gio creates a warm Mediterranean atmosphere with rich, earthy colors and lots of natural light. Of course, the massive open flame Woodstone oven dominates the space -- which is where your eyes should be anyhow to watch Tony tend to some of his creations. Service was professionally cordial.

The food

For starters, I ordered the White Bean Cappucino Soup (\$2.95). This puree of white bean was creamy, frothy and looked just like the coffee drink it's named for. While it required some stirring, it's a unique dish with a salty pop to it. If you're a fan of potato soup, you'd most likely enjoy this -- as did my date, whose one bite turned into several.

For her entrée, she ordered the personal-sized, hand-tossed Mediterraneo pizza (\$10.95), which was cooked in that giant hearth at a whopping 600 degrees. Using some imported ingredients, this is a collection of artichokes, olives, pine nuts, tomatoes, roasted garlic and roasted red peppers.

Just like Hannibal, I love it when a pie (or was it plan?) comes together, and this one definitely did. The crisp grilled flavors of all the elements meshed perfectly without outshining each other. If this pizza is any indication, Gio is the place to go for pizza with a personal touch.

For my part, I went with a highly recommended "Gio classic," the Gio Melt with chicken (\$17.95). With medallions of chicken topped with roasted eggplant, squash, zucchini and fresh mozzarella, the Melt is a fine example of what the house excels at beyond pizza.

The kicker of the Melt is the red wine reduction sauce the medallions sit in. On its own, it probably wouldn't taste like much, but it definitely accentuated the chicken and created a consistently good flavor.

With my Melt, I received a side of Gio's wonderful Tuscan fries; essentially thick, meaty French Fries with seasonings.

Not at all greasy, these were incredibly poppable, and went great with parmesan on top. Plus, our side of grilled asparagus (\$3.95) was a favorite. Blackened just a bit and grilled with olive oil and seasonings, these were like buttah.

The dessert

We finished with a delightful lemon panna cotta, a flan-like silky custard that's both tart and sweet (\$5.95). But I hear the chocolate-hazelnut Nutella pizza is also a homerun.

The damage

Just over two Stonewall Jacksons before taxes and tip.

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