

Tempting aroma will draw you into Luna
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Written by Barbara Bell Matuszewski

"I like to eat Luna, but we always have to wait for a table – as if it were a brand new place," a friend complained recently.

Not having savored a meal at that downtown restaurant for some years, husband Fran and I went last week to determine whether the food is as good as it was early on and whether meals are worth waiting for. In an effort to avoid a crowd, we arrived at a reduced-traffic time; even so, two-thirds of the tables were occupied.

The dinner menu lists five appetizers (\$6.45-\$6.95), four (small and large portions for three) salads (\$3.25-\$9.95), 15 entrees (\$12.45-\$15.45), 11 styles of pasta (\$9.45-\$10.95), seven baked casseroles ((\$10.95-\$11.95), seven specialties (\$11.45-\$12.95), three seafood courses (\$12.95-\$15.95), seven hot sub sandwiches (\$5.95-\$6.95) and countless versions of pizza that are available whole (\$8.95-\$17.55) or by the half (\$7.50 and up).

In each menu category, specialties tempt diners – for example, rigatoni a la vodka (\$11.95), scungilli and garlic in marinara sauce (\$12.95), veal rollatini (\$15.45), chicken Florentine (\$13.45), and both low-fat (\$8.95 and \$10.85) and vegetable pizzas (\$12.45-\$17.55).

The lunch menu is equally appealing. At midday, in addition to whole and half-pizzas, slices are available (\$1.75-\$3.50); on our visit, a zucchini version was the day's special. In addition, you can choose from calzones (\$5.25-\$6.70), both cold (\$5.35-\$6.15) and hot (\$5.25-\$5.95) subs, strombolis (\$4.95-\$5.50), eight (three in large or small sizes) salads (\$2.95-\$9.95), six of the evening entrees (\$7.45-\$7.95) and 10 at-night pasta selections (\$6.95-\$8.95), Daily specials are also offered.

Luna's well-known hot garlic knots are served with all entrees, pasta preparations and salads; you can also buy them individually (25 cents) or by the dozen, (\$3). In addition, the roster of toppings (65 cents - \$1.80 each) for pizzas is almost limitless, ranging from fresh basil, mushrooms, and tomatoes to meats, vegetables, olives, anchovies and cheeses.

Perhaps the most appealing greeting on entering any restaurant is its aroma. It can whet the appetite and promise pleasure, At Luna, the first whiff, emanated from the take-out window on our way to the door; then, once inside this plainly comfortably furnished dining room, we were captivated by an especially fragrant bouquet of baking bread, garlic, cheeses and simmering tomato sauce. Fran ordered a bottle of beer (\$2.75) – the perfect beverage, he said, with pasta. I drank iced tea (\$1.50). After much mulling, Fran decided on lasagna with meat (\$7.95), which, the waitress said would take a little time since each portion is baked to order. Fran agreed, knowing that, while waiting, he could eat the side salad and four garlic knots.

I selected a Stromboli (\$5.50) – also baked ot order – filled with Italian sweet sausage, tomato sauce and mozzarella, and presented with more sauce on the side.

We shared the salad, which was crisp, fresh and flavorful, thanks in part to well-seasoned vinaigrette. As for the fresh, hot, light, yeasty, garlicky bread...it alone is the worth the trip.

The wait for our main courses did not seem overly long – maybe because we were enjoying the salad and bread. Fran’s very large portion of lasagna was delicious. The pasta layers were light and fork-tender. The sauce was fresh and jammed with tomato and herbal flavors. Ad, a layer of good-tasting melted cheese served as icing on the “cake”.

My Stromboli was the best I have eaten in South Florida. First of all, the bread surrounding the filling must be hand-made – not extracted from a package of frozen speed-scratch dough. As a result, it is of the same fine quality as the garlic knots. Second, the sausage was subtly but delightfully seasoned. And, third, the tomato sauce was excellent. I consumed only half, however, for Luna’s strombolis are large. The next day, I reheated my left-over section and savored this dish again.

For our meals, we spent \$13.35, minus 25 percent (\$3.36) which was offered until September 27, plus \$4.25 for beverages, \$1 sales tax, and \$3 tip, totaling \$18.34. We rate Luna:

Food – Delicious.

Service – Good; and, when the restaurant got crowded, better than we expected.

Prices – Just fine.

Value – Very Good.

Atmosphere – Comfortable and functional; nothing special, but who cares?

Overall – Good-tasting food in the magnet, and customers are willing to wait for tables.

Freelance writer Barbara Bell Matuszewski dines anonymously at the expense of the News.