

Cafe di Napoli serves cuisine of memories

Long before Figlio and CocoLezzone and D'Amico Cucina, even before Vescio's and Mama D's, there was the Cafe di Napoli at 816 Hennepin Av. in Minneapolis. The downtown cafe is coming up on its 50th birthday, an impressive accomplishment in a business where restaurants have the lifespan of gypsy moths.

Dining at the Cafe di Napoli recently, I was reminded of a chow-mein tasting I conducted about a year ago. The tasting was suggested by Vince Shea, a reader who had grown up on Minnesota chow mein, a happy mush of overcooked celery and canned crispy noodles, liberally seasoned with MSG.

Shea, guest of honor at the tasting, was about 30 years older than most of the other participants. He watched with dismay as his younger, yuppie fellow tasters carefully scrutinized the various chow meins, judging each for the crispness, freshness and variety of its vegetables. The highest-rated chow-meins were those that tasted the least like the ones Shea had enjoyed as a child.

Finally, in frustration, Shea blurted, "The trouble with you guys is, you judge food too much by how it tastes."

Shea was joking, of course. But sometimes, what we want most from a dining experience isn't crisp, fresh vegetables or delicate sauces. Sometimes what matters is that the food be true to our memories.

That's how it is with the Cafe di Napoli. The menu mostly dates back to the days before *risotto al funghi* and sun-dried tomatoes, even before the days of fettucine carbonara and veal piccata, to a time when (at least in the Midwest) Italian food meant a big plate of spaghetti covered with red sauce.

For diners who have grown used to the likes of *tagliatelli alla porcini* and *zuppa di pesce*, the Cafe di Napoli's offerings may prompt a wave of nostalgia: spaghetti with your choice of meat balls, sausage, chili mack, mushrooms, turkey, shrimp Creole or Italian sausage; or pizza, ravioli, mostaccioli, lasagna or manicotti. (Most entrees are \$4.50 to \$6.95, a few are higher).

NAPOLI: It's comfortable

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If you're one of those people who judge food too much by how it tastes, you may not be very impressed with the Cafe di Napoli. An awful lot of it seems to taste the same, because nearly everything is covered with the same red Genoese meat sauce. The spaghetti with meatball (\$5.30) tastes like the mostaccioli, which tastes like the lasagna (\$6.60), which tastes much like the manicotti with meat filling (\$6.10); not surprising, because they're basically all different arrangements of the same ingredients. The pasta isn't really *al dente* but it's not mushy.

I sampled only one pizza, a very standard sausage and cheese pie (\$6.15) with a thin but not very crisp crust. The *antipasto* seems rather meager, considering its price (\$5.45).

A couple of dishes are different. The *braccioli* (\$9.95 with salad, soup or pasta and coffee or tea) are rolled beef birds stuffed with a mixture of bread crumbs, onions and cheese, and topped with a thick sweetish mushroom-wine sauce. The meat was rather thick and chewy but flavorful.

The chicken *cacciatori* (\$11.60 with accompaniments) was also a better-than-average rendition of this classic: whole pieces of chicken sautéed with tomatoes, green peppers and olives in a rich red sauce. The linguini with white clam sauce (\$6.95) contain a generous quantity of chopped clams, but would have benefited from fresh garlic and parsley. Desserts included *cannoli* stuffed with strawberry ice cream (\$1.50), a Sicilian *cassata* cake layered with ricotta and candied fruit (\$2.05), and *spumoni* ice cream (\$1.80).

It's not cuisine for the sophisticated palate, but if you grew up in the era of spaghetti and meatballs, this may be the cuisine of your memo-

Cafe di Napoli

Food	★ 1/2
Service	★ 1/2
Ambiance	★★ 1/2
Value	★★

816 Hennepin Av., Minneapolis, 333-4949.
Lunch Monday through Saturday 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Dinner weekdays 3 p.m. to 11 p.m., Saturday 3 p.m. to 11 30 p.m.
Wheelchair access.

Long before Figlio and CocoLezzone and D'Amico Cucina, even before Vescio's and Mama D's, there was the Cafe di Napoli. At this downtown cafe — coming up on its 50th birthday — you'll find Italian-American cooking from the era before cuisine: spaghetti with your choice of meat balls, sausage, chili mack, mushrooms, turkey, shrimp Creole or Italian sausage; or pizza, ravioli, mostaccioli, lasagna or manicotti. It's not for the sophisticated palate, but if you grew up in the era of spaghetti and meatballs, it may be the cooking of your memories.

★★★★	Excellent
★★★	Very good
★★	Good
★	Fair

ries. And there are times when all the sun-dried tomatoes and *porcini* mushrooms in the world can't take the place of that.