

Camillo's Caf  

Built on clear flavors and simple techniques, the food here is provocative and authentic

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SOME things do get better with age and Camillo's Caf   is definitely one of them. Four and a half years ago Camillo's was new to the Princeton dining scene. Situated off the beaten path in the Princeton Shopping Center, this quiet nook seemed to get little attention. Slowly, the restaurant made some structural changes, fine tuned its food and made its way onto the map. The restaurant now takes pride in its semi-exposed kitchen, al fresco dining (popular in warm weather), and an additional indoor space used for private parties and overflow.

On a weekend evening the main dining room is aglow with golden and rust-colored hues, dim lighting and comfortable chatter. Caf   curtains, decorative accessories and tables spaced a cozy distance apart all add to the charm of this little trattoria. The semi-exposed kitchen is the perfect fit for owner and chef Camillo Tortola, whose exuberant personality is expressed as he goes about his craft and finds moments to mingle with customers. He wants/needs to be part of the whole picture and that he is.

Tortola is from Miranda, Italy, where he grew up on his grandmother's cooking, a mix of Roman and Neopolitan styles. He credits his grandmother for developing his taste for good food, the kind of food he strives to bring to Princeton. Tortola owns the restaurant with his wife, Roberta Pughe, who is the business mind behind the restaurant. With the soul of an artist, Tortola has created a menu that is well conceived in size and scope. He has a lovely touch with tomato-based sauces, handles meat skillfully and produces a phenomenal tiramisu. The food here is built on clear flavors and simple techniques, a combination that not only produces the most provocative food, but is the cornerstone of authentic Italian cooking.

Tortola dreams of adding an antipasto bar to the restaurant and opening up the main dining room so that it connects with the neighboring space that is currently used for private parties. So far, with his dedication and commitment, he has made his dreams reality; I expect we'll see the emergence of the antipasto bar in the near future.

Another goal is to move away from the Italian American style restaurant that is so popular in the area and set Camillo's Cafe apart by offering food that is more indicative of a true trattoria in Italy. Slowly, Tortola has started to import more ingredients from Italy such as porcini mushrooms and a truffle spread. He also plans to introduce Botarga di Muggine, a delicacy of which he speaks longingly, to his repertoire of imported ingredients. He envisions grating it over a simple linguine dish with jumbo shrimp and olive oil. What is Botarga di Muggine? It's mullet (the fish) eggs that have been air-dried for two years. Is Princeton ready for this? I trust this worldly town will welcome the culinary experience.

Bright tomato bruschetta arrives to the table promptly and is the "food for thought," to be enjoyed while perusing the menu. The sweet, ripe tomatoes are virtually naked with just a gentle seasoning and a sparse drizzle of oil, a preparation that typifies Tortola's style. This became the perfect distraction while we waited... and waited for our server to greet us. Finally, our server made contact and followed up by taking our orders. From then on it seemed as if a random selection of staff kept coming to our table, bringing dishes, filling water, tending to our needs, with very few visits from our actual server.

That said, there are certain aspects of this Italian style service that I very much appreciated. For one thing, you are provided with exactly what you need for each course, never having to ask for that spoon or eat at a cluttered table. After each course silverware (decorative and substantial) is taken away and replaced with fresh silverware for the next course. It seems an obvious transition, but it is remarkable how many times I'm expected to "save" my fork.

Tortola lets the deep flavor of the mushrooms come through in his pureed, cream of portabello mushroom soup (cup \$6, bowl, \$9). The seasoning is delicate, yet the soup pulls off a satisfying hearty texture. A lightly dressed arugula salad special (\$13) was fresh and straightforward with little compelling hooks in the form of prosciutto, walnuts and dried cranberries.

A linguine special of the evening, featuring grilled sea scallops and arugula in a light white wine tomato sauce was simple and delectable (\$25). We mentioned that we intended to share this dish. Service, in all its disjointed play, was alert and put the linguine in the center of the table, providing each diner with individual plates, (which by the way, are white with a 'Camillo's Café' insignia on it). Maybe service is more together than it appeared from the outside.

Perhaps a subsequent visit is in order, if only to get another taste of that chicken scarpariello (\$24), a lovable dish prepared on the stove. Chicken pieces (with bone) are succulent amid sauce that incorporates white wine, chicken broth, rosemary, garlic and a salty lift provided by pieces of sausage. A bright side of broccoli rabe was just the thing. The veal chop special of the evening (\$30) was a success despite the challenge I thought it might be. A thick chop was grilled and topped with a textural truffle spread (imported). The interplay of distinct grill flavoring, woody nuances from the topping and a tender bite came together effortlessly.

Cannelloni di pesce (\$22), a signature dish of the restaurant, finds shrimp, scallops and spinach rolled up in three pasta sheets. These substantial tubes are covered with a multidimensional sauce incorporating tomato, béchamel, white wine, saffron, breadcrumbs, fish stock and chili flakes, and then baked. The spicy component can come as a surprise and many, I fear, would miss the element of melted cheese usually associated with a cannelloni dish found in an Italian-American restaurant. These are the points Tortola will have to overcome in re-teaching Italian flavors to his customers so he can move his restaurant forward, out of America and into Italy. Still, this is a nicely executed dish with perfectly prepared pasta sheets, fresh seafood filling and a vibrant sauce.

Never skip dessert at Camillo's Café. After a short time of employing a French pastry chef, Tortola decided to make his own. What a good business decision. His cannoli (\$8) is light, fresh and filled with the most agreeable cannoli cream. A sprinkling of sweet strawberries offers color and pop. Brace yourself for the tiramisu (\$8), an 80-year old recipe that comes from Tortola's grandmother. It is divine and certainly one of the best I've ever had.

I reviewed this restaurant several years ago at its beginnings. Back then, I assessed that the food was fresh and exemplified good quality but needed a bit more energy. Today, I recognize significant changes in the food. Yes, it has found that spark and yes, it is definitely showing signs of moving closer to authentic Italian. Tortola has found a sweet spot. He stays true to his unadulterated style, yet produces food that really speaks to customers.

Evolution is natural in anything that thrives and it's a necessity in the restaurant business. I look forward to a visit in the future, as Tortola stands on the cusp of the next phase of his restaurant. A new menu is imminent. Keep an eye out for the creamy polenta with fresh porcini mushrooms, champignon, truffle oil and pecorino cheese.

What I love about this restaurant, besides its charming simplicity, is its tasteful candor. It's an integral part of the food, the management and yes, even the service.

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